The New Criterion

October 1987

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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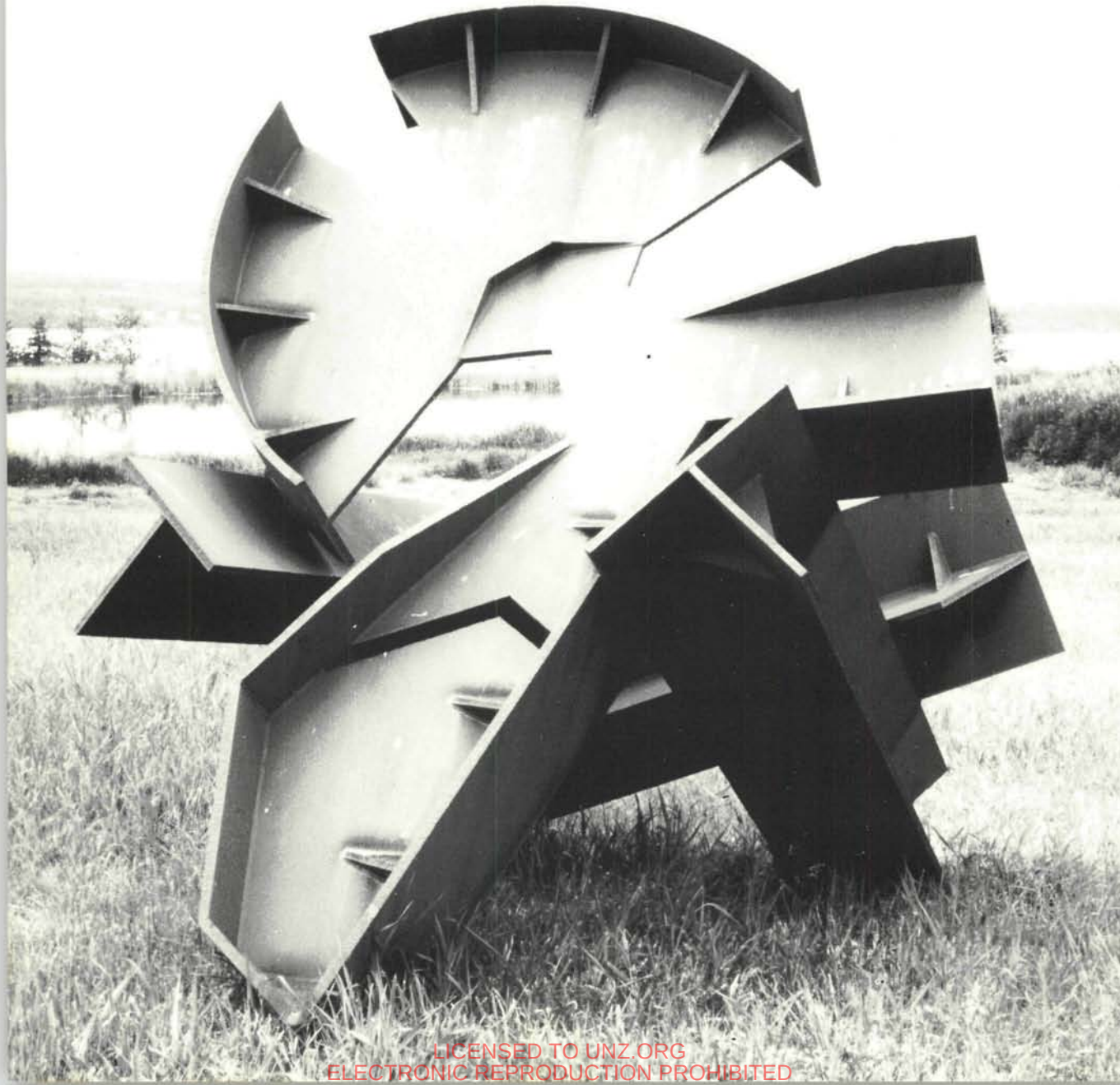

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Bruce Bawer's book, *The Contemporary Stylist,* was recently published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

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Joseph Epstein's most recent book is *Once More Around the Block* (Norton).

Prescott Evarts, Jr., teaches at Monmouth College. His poetry has appeared in *The Hudson Review.*

James Gardner reviewed Donald Prater's *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rilke* for our January issue.

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Jed Perl's study of French art since World War One, *Paris Without End,* will be published in February by North Point Press.

Eva Resnikova wrote on the Netherlands Dance Theater for the September issue of *The New Criterion.*

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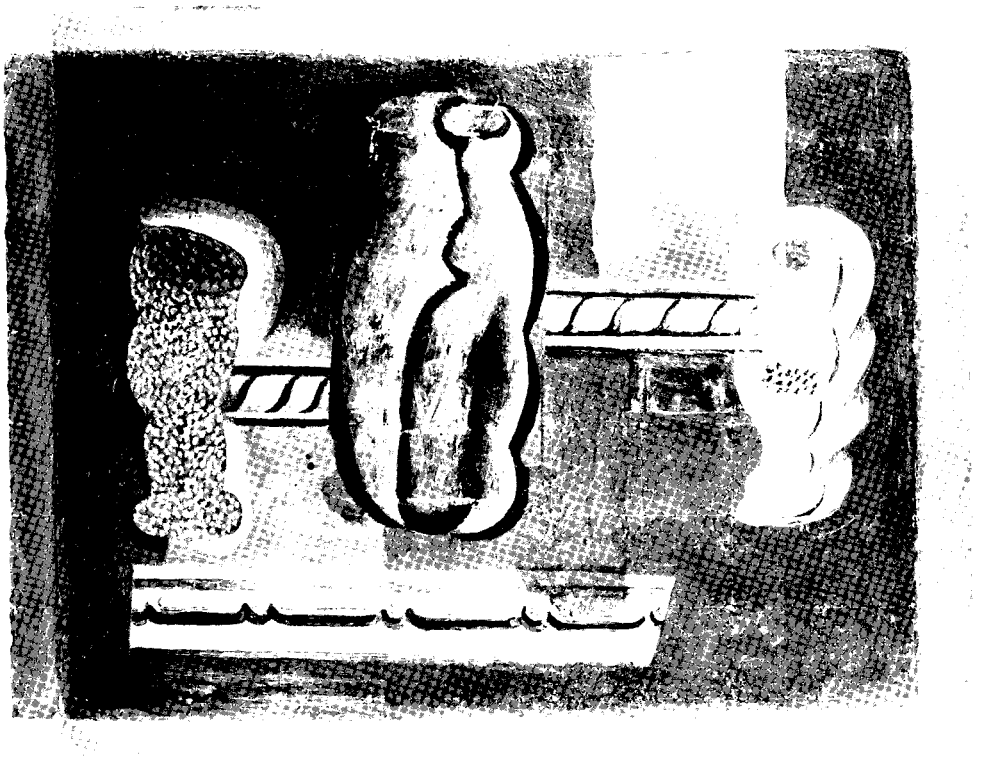

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The Tynan phenomenon
by Hilton Kramer

One of my unarguable postulates about aesthetics is that life mimics art, not art life.
—Kenneth Tynan, in *He That Plays the King* (1950)

Occupation: *Opinion-monger, observer of artistic phenomena, amateur ideologue.*
—Kenneth Tynan, in the Foreword to *Tynan Right & Left* (1967)

The word "art" is now really no use to me at all . . . . When I hear the word "art" now, I begin to yawn; to me, it's somehow a cop-out word, a word to dodge and hedge with, a word that means something different in everyone's mouth . . . . I've tried, in everything I've written over the last five years or so, to avoid using the word . . . .
—Kenneth Tynan, in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* (1975)

From time to time a critic emerges who may truly be said to personify a period—to embody in his person as well as in his writings the spirit of a certain historical moment. The late Kenneth Tynan (1927-1980), who is now the subject of a "candid" biography written by his widow,[1] was certainly a critic of this sort. In no other writer of his generation in England were the special aspirations and the sometimes crippling contradictions of the post-World War II cultural scene in Britain so conspicuously or so entertainingly displayed. In none were the peculiar gyrations of the Zeitgeist so graphically traced. Kingsley Amis is no doubt funnier and greater, John Wain graver, Doris Lessing more knowledgeable—even if not always wiser—about politics, and Philip Larkin altogether a weightier figure. Yet Tynan had something that even the most gifted of his literary contemporaries generally lacked: he described it, in speaking of the theater, as "star quality," and there can be no question but that he was in posession of a large measure of this mysterious attribute from an early age. Even his many enemies were disinclined to deny it, however much they resented his success and envied his celebrity. Driving ambition, demonic energy, literary talent, journalistic flair, critical acumen, and a ferocious appetite for work: to all of these was added, in Tynan's case, an indispensable gift for making himself as much of a personality as the great performers he wrote about with so much ardor and admiration. Tynan was a writer who cast a spell—the kind of spell that belongs as much to the realm of show business, which was one of his specialties, as to the world of arts and letters. In this respect at least, though he has had many imitators, he has had no real successor. The role expired with his own demise. Indeed, considering the awful disarray of his last years, it seems even to have pre-deceased him by a little.

1 *The Life of Kenneth Tynan*, by Kathleen Tynan; William Morrow & Company, 624 pages, $22.95.

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That much of what he wrote has proved to be ephemeral ought not to come as any surprise. Permanence is not the province of either journalism or celebrity—the two realms in which Tynan scored his greatest successes—and he was more adept at describing the effect of an immediate theatrical event than at assessing its permanent significance. He was not what you would call a thinker. He appropriated ideas as they served his purpose, and he was not given to fussing over inconsistencies. As a critic, Tynan worked very much as certain high-style actors do, always ready with the rhetorical flourish or the *coup de théâtre* that disarms complacency and causes both shock and applause. He was richly endowed with the histrionic instinct, and knew a great deal about winning—and keeping—the attention of his audience. He understood very well that it isn't necessarily by means of reasoned argument that the critic—especially the critic of theatrical performance—sways his readers; that intensely held convictions, persuasively stated, often accomplish far more—and far more quickly—than pious praise or respectful analysis or, for that matter, clever disparagement. Not that he ever hesitated to dispense the latter in large and lethal doses: Vivien Leigh's performance as Blanche in Laurence Olivier's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire,* for example, he characterized as that of "a posturing butterfly, with no depth, no sorrow, no room for development, and above all, no trace of Blanche's crushed ideals." And this was a valentine compared to his account of the same actress's attempt to play Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Clearly he was deeply in love—and was seen to be in love—with the magic of the theatrical event, and eager to serve as its impassioned acolyte. His quarrels with actors, playwrights, theater companies, and the stage itself were always a lover's quarrels, and a large part of his appeal lay in his ability to kindle in his readers, if only for as long as it took them to read his reviews, a kindred emotion.

It helped, of course, that in writing about the theater, he knew what he was talking about, and very early on, too. His first volume of dramatic criticism, *He That Plays the King,* was published in 1950 when Tynan was twenty-three. It is a remarkable book, without a dull page or a dead sentence, and its many paragraphs devoted to what Tynan called "heroic" acting—Laurence Olivier as Richard III, Ralph Richardson as Peer Gynt, John Gielgud as Hamlet—are as fine as anything he ever wrote about the actor's art, which was always to be his best subject. On Gielgud as Hamlet:

> His voice is all soul, injured and struggling: but the body is curiously ineffectual, with the result, for me, that his acting lacks stomach and heart. He prances fluently enough, but with the grace of ballet rather than of animals and men. One thinks of Olivier in terms of other species, of panthers and lions: one thinks of Gielgud in terms of other arts, of ballet and portrait painting.

Again and again in that first book Tynan identified with an astonishing aesthetic precision the qualities and the defects that would continue to distinguish a generation of great actors for many years to come.

He described *He That Plays the King,* quite accurately, as "a book of enthusiasms, written by an *aficionado,* out of an almost limitless capacity for admiration." Given this penchant for hero worship, it was a mercy that the British stage offered the young Tynan so much that truly merited the praise and concentration he was so eager to lavish upon it. Later, in the Fifties when he brought this almost limitless capacity for admiration to the political arena, he wasn't so lucky.

In political matters Tynan, to be blunt about it, was an ignoramus, and the theater—however fine it might be artistically—proved, not surprisingly, not to be the place in which to acquire the rudiments of a political education. When, in the biography that Kathleen Tynan has now devoted to her late husband, we read that "through Arthur Miller's work Ken received an education in social responsibility," we hardly know whether

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to laugh or cry—and not because Mrs. Tynan has in any way misrepresented the facts of the case, but precisely because she has given us an altogether fair account of the level on which Tynan's political thought, if indeed it can be called that, generally operated. From the moment of his political conversion in the Fifties, Tynan spouted nothing but the standard left-wing clichés whenever he turned his attention, as he increasingly did, to political causes. From his youth in provincial Birmingham he had been a dandy and an aesthete. Even the Second World War, which in England, as elsewhere, was not easily ignored, somehow failed—as Mrs. Tynan acknowledges—to make much of an impression on Tynan. The point is, when he turned Left, announcing in 1955 that "I have seen *Mother Courage* and I am a Marxist," he remained a dandy and an aesthete, judging every political issue as a matter of style and taste. In an almost literal sense, politics became another branch of theater for him.

In the short term, this political turn did much to increase Tynan's popularity and influence. (I am not suggesting that popularity was his motive; more likely, his political turn was only another example of his talent for spotting a trend.) Yet in the end it was one of the things that ruined him for criticism. In *He That Plays the King* he had written that "the study of actors should be a full-time task, involving endless research and intense concentration," and he complained that "it is a sad truth that nearly all our dramatic critics are, in the last analysis, dilettantes." In my opinion Tynan *was* a great critic of acting, but he was incapable of according to politics the kind of research and concentration he brought to the art of the actor, and thus remained in political matters what he despised in his own field—a sentimental dilettante. In a lengthy interview conducted in 1970—it was published for the first time in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* five years later—he blithely described Fidel Castro as "a high definition performer," comparing him in this respect to Winston Churchill and Johnny Carson! Sadly, he didn't seem to grasp that such utterances were guaranteed to render him ridiculous. But by then he had given up being a critic, and had thus abandoned the only vocation that had ever really suited his talents.

In writing *The Life of Kenneth Tynan,* Mrs. Tynan—who is herself a professional writer: this is her third book—has an interesting, if melancholy, tale to tell, and for the most part she tells it well. But she has not entirely solved the problem of dealing with herself as a character in the story. As we might expect from a widow's book that is at once a biography and a memoir, this *Life* is written with a good deal of sympathy and affection. It is also, however, a biography in the new mode. Which means that we are spared little or nothing about the more sordid and reprehensible aspects of Kenneth Tynan's private life. Exactly why Mrs. Tynan has chosen to go into these matters in such excruciating detail is not altogether clear. Certainly they illuminate nothing essential about his work as a critic—and it is in his work as a critic, after all, that Tynan makes his primary claim on our attention. Perhaps she felt it would have been inappropriate to withhold such details in writing the biography of the man who achieved a certain fame—at least in Britain—for being the very first to use the word "fuck" in a London Sunday paper *and* in a BBC broadcast, and who was also, of course, the man who gave the world *Oh! Calcutta.* But if so, that would only explain the sexual revelations, and not the detailed account of Tynan's snobbery, his careerism, his drinking, his tantrums, his political muddles, his outrageous treatment of family and friends, and his relentless pursuit of fame and the famous. It is a wicked thought, but sooner or later in reading this dolorous chronicle of Kenneth Tynan's life one cannot help wondering if there is not a large element of sexual revenge at the very heart of the book Mrs. Tynan has given us. From its own account, to be sure, there can be little question but that Tynan gave both his wives—and plenty of other women besides—

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ample reason to seek such revenge. But the spectacle of its enactment in the form of a posthumous biography by his widow is nonetheless not a very pretty one, and it is all the more dismaying in a book that finally seems to miss the point of Tynan's significance as a writer.

For a reader of my generation, which was also Tynan's, it comes as something of a shock to be made to realize how quickly he has become an historical figure representing a distant era. In my view, anyway, he remains essentially a figure of the Forties and the Fifties when he did his best work—an essentially English figure whose American career, which ended in a shambles of physical ruin, financial debt, and psychological turmoil in (where else?) the alien environs of Southern California, now reads like a grotesque and protracted epilogue out of Evelyn Waugh. From his school days in Birmingham, Tynan had been enamored with *The New Yorker*, with Hollywood movies (and movie stars), and American show business, yet when his ardent wish to become an eminence in that world—a star among the stars—came to be abundantly fulfilled, it turned out to mark the beginning of an irreversible decline. One of the last notes he made to himself when he was dying was a reminder to ask Gore Vidal for a loan of twenty-five thousand dollars: an epitaph that even Waugh might have hesitated to invent.

Like so many of the aesthetic rebels of his generation, he had been born into a prosperous middle-class family that provided him with the means of rejecting it. In Tynan's case, however, the family was a little unusual, for his parents were never married. His father, who had a separate wife and family, was known in public life as Sir Peter Peacock, the mayor of Warrington who was a wealthy businessman and had once stood for Parliament. In Birmingham, where he lived half the week, commuting in his chauffeur-driven Daimler, with Tynan's mother, a former postal clerk, he was simply Mr. Tynan.

Kenneth Tynan claimed never to have known about his father's double life until the day of his death, which occurred when Tynan was about to leave Oxford. He was outraged that he had never been told about his illegitimacy. But Kathleen Tynan clearly doesn't believe he didn't know, and it does strain credulity when everyone else in the story seems to have been fully aware of the situation, and Sir Peter Peacock was hardly an obscure figure. Feigned or not, his outrage provided the young Tynan with the grounds for rejecting his mother while availing himself of the money with which she generously supported his extravagant tastes—a practice that continued even after Tynan's first marriage to an American girl with an income of her own.

Amazingly, he appears to have developed the disciplined habits of a professional critic even before he went to Oxford. Equally important is the fact that even in wartime the theater in Birmingham was a flourishing artistic enterprise. By the time he entered Oxford after the war, Tynan not only knew that he was destined for a career in the theater—whether as critic, actor, or director was not yet clear—but had already seen enough high-level work to have become something of an expert.

It was at Oxford that he first emerged—very much by his own design—as a star. His clothes were expensive and outrageous, his antics legendary, his intellectual precocity already a source of fame, and, not incidentally, his allowance from Sir Peter Peacock extremely generous. Most important of all, however, is the fact that he was already an accomplished writer. "His tutor C. S. Lewis," Mrs. Tynan writes, "said of Ken's early essays in English literature that if Lamb and Gibbon had been the same person, Ken's were the kind of essays they would have produced at prep school." Much that he wrote about the theater while he was at Oxford went straight into *He That Plays the King*. There can hardly have been another critic of his generation who was so well prepared to take up the role.

The key to the immense impression that Tynan made as a dramatic critic, first at Oxford and then when he took London by

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storm, was his special gift for outfitting a serious critical intelligence in the habiliment of cosmopolitan glamour. In a society that had emerged from the war with reduced expectations and a sense of lost glory and now lived in an atmosphere of austerity and gloom, this alliance of glamour and intellect exerted an electrifying appeal, especially for the young—and all the more so because unlike the reigning cosmopolitan critics of the older generation, such as Cyril Connolly, Raymond Mortimer, and Harold Nicolson, Tynan's critical outlook was untouched by any lachrymose nostalgia for a lost golden age. It was firmly anchored in the present and was patently impatient to create a future.

If there was always a certain element of rhetorical tinsel in Tynan's writing, there was something still more important—his deep attachment to the great classics of the English stage. Just to read through the incredible number of pieces Tynan devoted to ambitious productions of Shakespeare's plays in the Forties and Fifties is to be reminded of how deep that attachment always was in the period of his heyday as a critic. The American theater never provided its critics, or of course its audience, with anything like a comparable range of artistic experience. When Tynan left *The Observer* for *The New Yorker* in the late Fifties, he uprooted himself from the native artistic soil that had nourished his finest achievements. He was never again a writer of the same quality or spirit. In New York, the glamour component swamped the critical intelligence it had once served so well.

By that time, too, the sense of building an artistic future, which had always been so important in Tynan's critical writing—and so important to his readers—had been overtaken by politics and become inseparable from it. In the London theater there had still been a sufficient number of artistic occasions that recalled Tynan to his original vocation. It was in America that he was finally and irrevocably transformed into an archetype of radical chic—the high-living, celebrity-seeking exponent of socialist causes, assiduously cultivating his dream of sexual liberation while running up enormous debts and systematically destroying his own health. The last pages of Mrs. Tynan's *Life* are terrible to read, for they trace the course of a tormented mind on a suicidal path. For anyone old enough to remember what it was like to read Tynan in *The Observer* in the Fifties—to recall the excitement and fun and sense of high artistic adventure that those weekly Sunday articles delivered with such unfailing regularity—*The Life of Kenneth Tynan* is a poignant reminder of how much the world, and not only the world of criticism and the theater, has changed, and changed for the worse, since the days when his star was so spectacularly in the ascendant.

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A cottage for Mr. Naipaul

by Joseph Epstein

V. S. Naipaul has made himself into a writer serious people cannot ignore. He has been able to fathom the crucial issues, questions, and problems of contemporary life well before they surface for even the most perceptive of us. Among living writers he has acquired, deservedly, the greatest reputation for facing unpleasant facts, for truth-telling, for grasping what is really happening in the world, and through his art demonstrating the personal consequences of public events. Everything Naipaul writes has the quality that used to be known as gravity, which derives in part from the subjects he writes about, his themes, and his inexorable manner of pursuing them. In part, too, it derives from his almost sovereign authority. *Sui generis,* he is a writer above nationality, above received opinions, above (apparently) normal attachments and loyalties. He is "a being organized for literature," as Henry James once described himself, but a being that not even Henry James, in all the richness of his imagination, could have anticipated.

Naipaul is a rare instance of a writer of world standing who comes from an island country in which, as he himself once put it, "the writer or the painter, unless he wins recognition overseas, preferably in England, is mercilessly ridiculed." Born in 1932, Indian by ancestry, British by education, and Trinidadian by origin, Naipaul is of a family that, though Brahmin by caste, arrived in the British West Indies toward the close of the last century as indentured laborers. Exotic though that vita sounds—and, in fact, is—the chief point is that V. S. Naipaul is a writer quite without precedent in the extent to which he has had, literally and literarily, to make himself. How a young man who left his home on an island at the mouth of the Orinoco at eighteen has been able to make such a strong impress on the world, so that one can speak confidently of people in real life as being "Naipaul characters," is itself an extraordinary story.

It is this story, precisely, that Naipaul has now begun to tell. Without the solid achievement that he has behind him—ten novels, eight books of history, criticism, political reportage—the story wouldn't quite exist; certainly, it would be nowhere near so compelling. V. S. Naipaul, whom people used fairly regularly to confuse with V. S. Pritchett, the English critic, and R. K. Narayan, the Indian novelist, V. S. Naipaul has become a writer of international stature, in a class with Milan Kundera and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Even his face, visage, no, better, countenance, such is its formality and formidability, with its slightly disdaining mouth, has taken on a world historical look. Gazing into photographs of that countenance, now in its middle fifties, pouched by discipline, shadowed by victories won doubtless at considerable psychic cost, one cannot find the face of the small, eighteen-year-old boy who, thirty-seven years ago, Indian relatives standing all about, boarded a plane at the crude airport at Port of Spain to fly to

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Puerto Rico, thence to New York, thence to London and eventually to Oxford to begin a career as a writer, about which, it is fair to say, he had only the dimmest notions.

In a contribution to a 1958 *Times Literary Supplement* symposium, Naipaul set out what seemed to him the apparently insurmountable problem of his career. This was that, after producing three books in five years that earned him a total of £300, he was a writer who wrote for an English audience about a country, Trinidad, which most people thought exotic at best. He was locked in as a regional writer, writing about a region in which few people were interested. He could hype up his books with sex, or he could put race at the center of them, yet neither solution seemed to him very promising. (Of the former, he remarks that he would be embarrassed to make his novels sexier, for "my friends would laugh" and "my mother would be shocked, and with reason"; of the latter, he feels race much too complex to jam crudely into fiction, and he notes that it is unfortunate "that the *Manchester Guardian* should have carried a warm article by a Sinhalese about race discrimination in America at a time when his countrymen were killing Tamils in Ceylon.") He feels that he does not know English life well enough to write about it either. And he ends by stating that his continuing to live in England may "eventually lead to my own sterility; and I may have to look for another job."

Three years later V. S. Naipaul published a novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), that is an authentic masterpiece, a great novel—as great a novel, in my view, as any written by a living novelist. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a long—five hundred and ninety pages in the Penguin edition—and splendidly intricate book, with a vast cast of characters, an epilogue, and a feeling for the roundedness of human personality which leaves the book's readers with the thoroughly satisfied feeling that nineteenth-century novels still produce. Although it is a long way from high bourgeois Baltic Germany to chaotic Indian Trinidad, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is also Naipaul's *Buddenbrooks*. Like Thomas Mann's novel, it is an account in fictional form of the author's family history, of the kind that, apart from its intrinsic interest, provides crucial clues to his own spiritual inheritance.

Mohun Biswas, the novel's protagonist, is modeled on Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul. A journalist, a short-story writer manqué, a late non-bloomer, Naipaul's father, in the account offered in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and in Naipaul's essay "Prologue to An Autobiography," was a man of delicate nervous organization, yet fierce pride, lacerating irony, and high ambition on which he could never quite make good. He had married into a family of wealthy Trinidadian Indian merchants and landowners, a family in which, owing to his irrepressible satirical streak and high opinion of himself, he could never find ease. Early marriage and many children weighed him down. It also forced him to live the better part of his married life among his despised in-laws in the maelstrom of an extended Indian family. The house that Mr. Biswas seeks in the novel represents his struggle to live in an independent way that comports with his imperishable sense of his own dignity.

A House for Mr. Biswas is, technically, a comedy. I say "technically" because, though the novel is filled with amusing things—many of them having to do with Indian domestic life, many with the madcap quality of provincial journalism in an island culture—its humor is finally bittersweet. Beneath its surface charm, *A House for Mr. Biswas* chronicles what the circumstances of life can do to pride, to ambition, to noble dreams; and what it can do is heartbreaking to behold. In a recent interview in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (July 5-11, 1987), Naipaul himself remarked that, when his novel was recently read on BBC radio, he could only bear to listen to a single episode. "I really can't do it too often. It's bad for me. I'm reduced to tears instantly." And elsewhere, recalling the anxiety of life in Trinidad, Naipaul has written about his novel: "It is that anxiety—the fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss—that

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lies below the comedy of *A House for Mr. Biswas.*"

Running through the second half of the novel is the relationship between Mr. Biswas and his son Anand. Anand is a good student who wins a scholarship first to Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain and later to Oxford. He is pretty clearly V. S. Naipaul. In the novel, Anand has inherited his father's raw nerves, his propensity toward anxiety, and yet, as Naipaul writes, "Though no one recognized his strength, Anand was among the strong. His satirical sense kept him aloof. At first this was only a pose, an imitation of his father. But satire led to contempt, and . . . contempt, quick, deep, inclusive, became part of his nature. It led to inadequacies, to self-awareness and a lasting loneliness. But it made him unassailable."

As the novel draws to its close, the indomitable Mohun Biswas's ambition is transferred to his son, "and his visions of the future became only visions of Anand's future." But Anand will disappoint. When Mr. Biswas writes to him in England, Anand replies with self-absorbed, self-pitying letters. "But writing to Anand was like taking a blind man to see a view," Naipaul writes, and we recall that Naipaul is here essentially writing about himself and his feelings of remorse for not properly responding to his father during the last, sad years of his father's life. In the end, of course, Naipaul responded by writing *A House for Mr. Biswas,* memorializing his father, fittingly and for all time, through literature.

Contrary to that school of modern psychology which holds that, owing to the unavailability of the real thing, every man wishes to marry a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad, the great figure in V. S. Naipaul's life was obviously his father. "My early work was very much an offering to him," Naipaul once told an interviewer, adding that from his mother he "got my other side—tenacity, toughness and self-reliance." Above all, Naipaul's is a life that reminds one how decisive the fate of a father can be for the character of a son. "When I get to your age," Anand tells Mr. Biswas, "I don't want to be like you." And Naipaul is not like his father, except that, like many another son of unfulfilled artists (such hefty names as Beethoven, Yeats, Picasso come to mind), he went on to fulfill his father's dreams. It was from his father that Naipaul acquired the notion that to write was to triumph over the darkness in the world, that writing implied a refusal to be extinguished, that the writer was a figure of nobility. Such is the subtext, the writing between the lines, in *A House for Mr. Biswas.* "The man who began that book," Naipaul has said, "is quite different from the man who ended it."

The man who ended it, the author of *A House for Mr. Biswas,* had paid off his debt to his region, and, though he would often look back, need not any longer think of himself as a regional writer. But, then, what kind of writer would he now be? V. S. Naipaul left Trinidad hoping to become a writer on what one thinks of as the international metropolitan model. He early set out to invent a literary personality that would write about the world with great sophistication and exclude race and humiliation, both of which he knew a good bit about. His early novels about Trinidad—*The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959)—expunged the childish notion that he might set up shop as a young Somerset Maugham. His quite magical achievement in his novel about his father had in large part put paid to his being a Trinidadian writer. He would have to await his subjects, find his form. Having no clear tradition out of which to write—"with Naipaul," Paul Theroux has written, "his tradition begins with him"—he would have to establish his own.

To say that V. S. Naipaul is a writer without a tradition is no small statement, given that Naipaul is himself highly tradition-minded. "The English language was mine," he has noted, recounting his education at Oxford, "the tradition was not." As a writer of immense literary ambition, he has carefully thought through the questions and problems surrounding his art. "Every seri-

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ous writer has to be original," he has written; "he cannot be content to do or to offer what has been done before." Until this point in his career, Naipaul's originality has lain in his subject matter. I take this subject matter to be the modern world at the end of empire. To understand the true vastness of this enterprise, in Naipaul's hands, it needs to be italicized that this has increasingly come to include *all* the modern world. Naipaul has written, in his novels and in his nonfiction, about Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, India, and the world of Islam. He has written about Europeans in these places, and he has written about the inhabitants of these places in Europe. The collision of cultures has become, with him, *une spécialité de la maison.*

Naipaul's own move from Trinidad to England in 1950, as he would himself come to recognize, "was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century—a movement and a cultural mixing greater than the peopling of the United States, which was essentially a movement of Europeans to the New World." In Naipaul's own trope, the great cities of Europe were as Rome after the fall. "They were to be cities visited for learning and elegant goods and manners and freedom by all the barbarian peoples of the globe, people of forest and desert, Arabs, Africans, Malays." Perhaps that word "barbarian" has arrested your attention. It may well be that among living writers only Naipaul is able to speak of "barbarian peoples"; only he can say things that, though perfectly apparent, in the mouths of others would straightaway be declared racism.

He is permitted to do so in part because he is himself a dark-skinned colonial, one of these barbarian peoples, or, to use the old British derogatory term, a "wog." (For the English, the grisly joke had it, wogs began at Calais.) In even greater part, far from pressing this accidental (now) advantage of birth to align himself on the side of those who claim to speak for the new dawn of revolution, Naipaul has earned the right to plain speaking through his impartiality as a reporter and a novelist, his disdain for sentimentalizing and romanticizing, his almost angry analytical disinterest, his freedom from cliché.

Of course, it isn't only, or even chiefly, the dark-skinned who are barbarians in Naipaul's work. Many of the most despised characters in his pages are Europeans who, filled with the rant of political slogans, the cant of received wisdom, are quite incapable of that first act of civilization: independent thought. Of a young political adventuress in his novel *Guerrillas* (1975), he notes that she had a great many opinions but that, taken together, these failed to add up to a point of view. In *A Bend in The River* (1979), a French couple in a newly independent African country have parties at which they play the records of Joan Baez, about which the novel's narrator remarks: "You couldn't listen to sweet songs about injustice unless you expected justice and received it much of the time. You couldn't sing songs about the end of the world unless . . . you felt that the world was going on and you were safe in it."

Political content has run high in the novels of what I suppose it is by now appropriate to call Naipaul's middle period, from *The Mimic Men* (1967) through *A Bend in The River* (1979). Aloof, dark, pessimistic, these novels force the question: Out of what kind of politics are they written? It is a simple question without a simple answer. In a novel such as *The Mimic Men,* whose narrator, Ralph Singh, is an exiled colonial politician now living in London, we get, in the voice of the narrator, a running criticism of the kind of men who have risen to the top in the countries of the third world:

> The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words and the acclamation of words for power; as soon as our bluff is called we are lost. Politics for us are a do-or-die, once-for-all charge. Once we are committed we fight more than political bat-

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> tles; we often fight quite literally for our lives. Our transitional or makeshift societies do not cushion us.

Such men are elsewhere characterized as "totally ridiculous":

> men without talent or achievement save the reputed one of controlling certain sections of the population, unproductive, uncreative men who pushed themselves into prominence by an excess of that bitterness which every untalented clerk secretes. Their bitterness responded to our appeal. And in this response we saw the success of our appeal, and its truth!

No one would ever describe V. S. Naipaul as coolly detached. Real anger, white hot, runs through these novels, and it is anger above all at the corruption of spirit that allows men and women to use other human beings to stoke up their own greed, power lust, and fantasies. Revolution is not a game, Naipaul's novels make clear, and people are not to be treated as inferior without the most serious consequences ensuing. Perhaps the most terrifying single scene of violence in a serious contemporary novel I have ever read is that which Naipaul wrote toward the conclusion of *Guerrillas.* In this scene a white woman, a revolutionary camp follower, is gruesomely raped and murdered by a failed black revolutionary at the end of his spiritual tether. What makes it so terrifying is not altogether to be found in the writing, which is taut and vivid enough. What makes it so terrifying is that Naipaul quite makes you believe that this hideous fate—multiple stabbings following upon forced sodomy—was, if not warranted, understandable.

Having said all that, one has still not located Naipaul politically. Among those sentimentally aligned with the fate of the third world countries—for whom one-party states are thought quite necessary at this point in history and no inefficiency, however epic in proportions, is inexcusable—Naipaul's name is sheer profanity. He is thought to be, anathema of anathemas, a conservative, which means unsympathetic to the travail of the world's newly independent people. His novels suggest no justification for revolution; his reportage puts forth no plans for reform. Offering no solutions, as they used to say in the bad old days of campus revolution, he is part of the problem.

Quite a different case could easily be made. It could, after all, be argued that everywhere Naipaul has looked—and as a world traveller, he has looked nearly everywhere—he has seen these same newly independent people conned, ill used, and generally diminished by their own would-be leaders and others with their own special agendas. It could be argued that, by holding these leaders to a serious political standard of forthrightness and asking that they accept the consequences of their actions, Naipaul refuses to condescend to them. It could be argued that, coming out of a colonial society himself, he understands how envenomed the history of these nations is, and how the poison circulating through these societies after years of servitude is not quickly discharged. But to grant all this would be to grant Naipaul's kind of conservatism a respectability that its enemies will not allow.

Not, one suspects, that Naipaul is himself eager to be thought conservative, or aligned with any other camp. An interviewer in a *New York Times Magazine* article of 1976 contended that "he [Naipaul] is beyond partisanship—neither a radical nor a conservative, but a disillusioned idealist who still believes in the possibility of man improving his world." A disillusioned idealist is another name for a man who can no longer believe, or even bear to hear, the same old lies. Except that Naipaul, owing perhaps to the scepticism learned from his father, never really believed in all the old lies in the first place. The habit of truth-telling is ingrained in him. When asked how he feels about the recent immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean by an interviewer in *The Illustrated Weekly of India,* Naipaul replied:

> I feel there will be a lot of difficulty. I don't see how it can be avoided, especially with these immigrants who are not migrating to a new

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> identity or a new kind of citizenship. They are migrating to allow their barbarism to flower, so they can be more Islamic or more Sikhish than they can be with the comparative economic stagnation of their home societies. I think it's very dangerous.

And this, please understand, is for consumption by an Indian audience.

Whatever his appropriate political label, Naipaul is certainly a conservative by temperament. He has a love for order of an intensity that can be held only by a man repelled by the disorder to which he was born. Naipaul's natural refinement comes through in all his writing—his hatred of crudity, his contempt for the blatant and the coarse. He has a keen, an almost excruciating sense of the perilousness of civilization. He cannot resist underscoring that nearby a golf course laid out in the administrative city of Yamoussoukro in the Ivory Coast crocodiles are kept and fed live chickens. The power of day, in the places Naipaul visits, is perpetually battling the power of night. The bush is silently growing back, the sands shifting, the wild grass popping through the crevices in the cement, all inexorably mocking the notion that modernization is tantamount to civilization.

V. S. Naipaul is something of a psychological Hobbesian, for whom life is nasty and brutish and he is short. He frequently mentions his own smallness. He notes his developing anxiety, his raw nerves, his fearful obsession with physical pain, his incipient hysteria, his panic. In Naipaul's books, human relations are frequently power relations, with status and security at risk, and humiliation always a distinct prospect. In his own life, Naipaul has remarked, the past for him "—as a colonial and writer—was full of shame and mortifications. Indeed, they became my subjects." A good part of Naipaul's art entails seeing through people's pretensions to their elemental desires and fears, their sadness, their fundamental vulnerability. Such skill puts high tension upon his page, persistent interest in his readers' minds.

Naipaul is a true writer, which is to say that, with a mind always engaged in brooding upon the problems of his art, he did not figure forever to confine himself to one subject, even so vast a subject as "the half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made." That phrasing comes from an essay of 1974 that Naipaul wrote on Joseph Conrad. Reading him in his maturity, Naipaul found affinity with Conrad, another permanent exile who had lived in England and who, sixty or seventy years earlier, "had been everywhere before me." True, Conrad did not have first-hand experience of the racial politics on which Naipaul has become a connoisseur—those politics of evasion and overstatement practiced by those third world leaders who blame everything on oppression caused by an ostensibly relentless racial enemy. But, more important, Naipaul and Conrad are alike in being writers without a society, who, in their wide experience, know many different societies from the outside but none securely from within.

This is part of the price one pays for being different. As a West Indian East Indian—or is it an East Indian West Indian?—Naipaul has always expected some recognition of his difference; and in an article written in 1962 he remarked that it "is only in India that I have recognized how necessary this stimulus is to me." (So much so that, while in India, tired of explaining that he was an Indian from Trinidad, he would sometimes find himself telling people that he was Mexican.) Along with his differentness, Naipaul has always had what has seemed a towering loneliness. He shares this quality with Conrad and with Henry James, who once averred that his loneliness was the deepest thing about him—"deeper than my 'genius,' deeper than my discipline, deeper, above all, than the deep counterminings of art." In fact, Naipaul is married, but his wife is never mentioned in any of his reportage or autobiographical writings; and he seems, in his literary personality, to emphasize, if not cherish and cultivate, his solitude.

When I speak of Naipaul's literary personality, I have in mind that personality, at once

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penetrating, unconnable, dour, that is at the center of his nonfiction. Naipaul has come to that point in his career where this personality is known to his readers. The facts of his past have been revealed; his quirks and obsessions are fairly well established. I mention all this because in his most recent work, *The Enigma of Arrival,*[1] Naipaul has written a book that comes very near depending upon readers having at least some prior knowledge of his life. Without it, I believe, this new book would be extremely puzzling; it might not even be quite comprehensible. *The Enigma of Arrival,* which marks a turn in V. S. Naipaul's career, is built on assumptions of a kind that only a writer of great ambition who is confident of his quality could have made.

I have referred to *The Enigma of Arrival* as a "book," hiding behind the safety of the general word, chiefly because, though its publisher refers to it as "fiction," it is not evident just what is fictional about it. Perhaps English libel laws required that the book be presented as a novel; perhaps the identity of living or recently deceased persons has been disguised to prevent hurting feelings. Doubtless characters drawn from life have been touched up or transformed. But at the heart of the book is a narrator, never mentioned by name, who shares the biography, idiosyncrasies, and style of V. S. Naipaul. (And style, for Naipaul, has never meant how one arranges words in sentences but a way of seeing the world around one.) When the narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* remarks, "Ever since I had begun to identify my subjects I had hoped to arrive, in a book, at a synthesis of the worlds and cultures that had made me," we take him at his word that this is the book we are reading and that it is an autobiographical account of the life of V. S. Naipaul. Naipaul is no John Barth or Donald Barthelme, playing literary games, holding mirrors up to mirrors. I think one does best to take this book as a nearly factual account of an important period in the life of V. S. Naipaul.

1 *The Enigma of Arrival,* by V. S. Naipaul; Alfred A. Knopf, 354 pages, $17.95.

Of course the distinction between fiction and autobiography has in recent decades not so much blurred as caved in. Every novelist writes out of his own experience, some less directly than others, and the history of the novel has long known such variants as the young writer's autobiographical novel, the *roman á clef,* the novel whose author rambles on autobiographically about contemporary life under the thinnest disguise. Coming at things the other way round, in a classroom I not long ago heard Frank Conroy, whose book *Stop-Time* I had taken to be one of the better American autobiographies produced since World War II, refer to his own book as a novel. Which is it, I afterwards asked Conroy, novel or autobiography? He said that he thought it didn't make much difference. I replied that I thought the difference was crucial, and that if the book was an autobiography it was brilliant, but that if it was a novel it was mediocre. By this I meant that an autobiography is judged by among other things its candor, tact, and fidelity to fact, whereas a novel is judged by quite different criteria, among them the power of its plot and elegance of its form.

Such questions, my guess is, are very much on V. S. Naipaul's mind. Every serious writer, he has said, "becomes aware of this question of form; because he knows that however much he might have been educated and stimulated by the writers he has read or reads, the forms matched the experience of those writers, and do not strictly suit his own." And in his essay on Conrad, he noted that "the novel as a form no longer carries conviction," and went on to say:

> Experimentation, not aimed at the real difficulties, has corrupted response; and there is a great confusion in the minds of readers and writers about the purpose of the novel. The novelist, like the painter, no longer recognizes his interpretive function; he seeks to go beyond it; and his audience diminishes. And so the world we inhabit, which is always news, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on; and there is no one to awake the sense of true wonder. That is

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perhaps a fair definition of the novelist's purpose, in all ages.

The Enigma of Arrival appears to be Naipaul's answer, for now, to the questions about form that press upon him at this point in his career. In this book he has written autobiography within what he asks us to believe is a fictional frame. In doing so he has not only combined his already proven talents as a first-person reporter and as a novelist, but has managed to find a form that permits him to ask autobiography's chief questions—Who am I? How did I become the man I am?—while retaining the novel's interest in the larger world. The result is a book at once complex and serious and not quite like any other in contemporary literature.

The mise-en-scène for *The Enigma of Arrival* appears in a paragraph of a 1976 article about V. S. Naipaul in *The New York Times Magazine,* which reads:

> At present he has two residences—a small London flat, kept by his wife, where he stays when he is in the city, and a house in the country, where he is totally by himself. The house is an hour and 40 minutes by train from London, near Salisbury, on the chalky plains of Wiltshire. It is a simple, low, one-floor stone and stucco cottage, called "The Bungalow," set back from a winding road. There is no marker or mailbox, no near neighbors and only the telephone for contact with the world. Naipaul takes a bus to town to buy groceries. A housekeeper comes in regularly. Occasionally friends visit; they do not stop by. "I'm not in touch any longer," he says. "I used to know a few people, but relationships have all withered away, just withered away."

For ten years, Naipaul tells us in *The Enigma of Arrival,* while living in the cottage in Wiltshire, he was to find himself "in tune with a landscape in a way that I had never been in Trinidad or India," and was "to be cleansed in heart and mind" and able to turn this setting into a haven for concentrated work. But this period, punctuated by trips abroad on magazine assignments, also threw him back upon himself, leaving him much time during lengthy walks in the environs of his cottage to inquire into how he had become the kind of man and writer he is. Earlier, after a publisher gave him a hard time with his novelistic history of Trinidad, *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), and while with trepidation he contemplated beginning his novel with an African setting that was to be *In A Free State* (1971), Naipaul, whom his readers generally take to be a detached observer, a man removed, began increasingly to think of himself as "a man played on, worked on, by many things."

A good part of *The Enigma of Arrival* is given over to the forces that made Naipaul: his education, his island culture, his fantasies, his anxieties, his ambitions. His education, which was more like a competition, for if one failed to win scholarships in Trinidad one was unlikely to be able to escape the island, was even more incomplete and abstract than most, if only because he read about things that existed nowhere in his environment. When he arrived in London, for example, he quite expected it to be the London of Dickens, whom his father had read to him when he was a boy. He lived imaginatively in the cinema and in books, and his imagination, in Trinidad, never rubbed up against modern reality. Among the things he imagined was a writer's life for himself of a kind he was not in any remote way cut out to live. The education of Naipaul's adult years was in large part devoted to shedding all the half-baked and hopeless notions he had acquired when young. In this he is rather like the rest of us, only more so.

These autobiographical segments are woven among Naipaul's accounts of his Wiltshire walks, his descriptions of landscape, his meetings with his neighbors. Years before, in 1969, in an article about Jacques Soustelle, the French anthropologist and then politician in exile, Naipaul remarked that Soustelle's conversational method resembled that of neither the scholar nor the politician but came closer to that of the novelist: "making art of egotism, creating a

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private impenetrable whole out of fragments which from a distance might appear unrelated." Such, too, is the method of this book. The little dramas of plot are entirely absent from its pages. People die, there is even a murder; but we hear about all this from the author. Events matter less than what Naipaul makes of them. The interest of the book is not in its action but in the analytical intelligence that is controlling it.

In place of dramatic action, Naipaul supplies quiet revelation and superior observation, so that *The Enigma of Arrival*, which takes its title from Naipaul's immigrant's fascination with a painting by that name by Giorgio de Chirico, takes on something of the structure of an onion, layer after layer of which has to be peeled back until one gets to the nub of the thing. One learns that Naipaul's cottage, for example, is part of a large manor house built during the confident years of Edwardian England. Of a church in the neighborhood built at roughly the same time, Naipaul writes: "as much as a faith, it celebrated a culture, a national pride, a power, men very much in control of their destinies." Church and manor are emblematic of the spirit of the British empire; and it was this empire, as Naipaul acknowledges, that "explained my birth in the New World, the language I used, the vocation and ambition I had; this empire in the end explained my presence there in the valley, in the cottage, in the grounds of the manor."

Naipaul is of course writing at a time well beyond the end of empire. The man who owns and inhabits the manor house is a neurasthenic aristocrat with not very impressive artistic pretensions. The couple who look after him and his estate are rootless people. The gardener, who takes great pains with his clothes, lives with his handsome wife in colorless squalor. The cab man, whose father worked on the manor, becomes ensnared in sectarian mystical religion. All the people connected with the manor "were curiously unanchored, floating." No one any longer seems in charge of his fate; no one controls his own destiny. "Fifty years ago," Naipaul notes, "there would have been no room for me on the estate."

Bit by bit, Naipaul learns more about each of the people who works or lives on the estate. Slowly, he comes to understand that, though technically all are in "service," as the English used to term the servant class, they "lived in a net of mutual resentment." Like the true novelist he is, Naipaul does not feel he knows a person until he knows how that person sees the world. Given the reticence of the English lower and lower-middle classes, this can take time. But in everyone Naipaul meets he eventually discovers a personal drama, an angle of vision, a different way of seeing that gives him insight into his or her character. The opinions of Bray, the cab man, for instance, are all borrowed from radio, television, and the popular press, but, when filtered through his personality and personal history, they are original in combination, making him something like an anarcho-Tory.

It has always been the mystery of human character that most interests V. S. Naipaul, and in *The Enigma of Arrival* he makes an extended effort to understand his own. This is a book in which Naipaul recognizes that he has come to middle age, and therefore it is a book about change and death and the impermanence of life. The book closes on the death of his sister in Trinidad, an event that showed him "life and man as the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory." (Naipaul's brother Shiva, also a novelist, died not long afterwards.)

"It was strange," Naipaul writes, "but for myself, in my cottage, I never, never feared." The inner security that he found in Wiltshire was owing, in good part, to his relationship to the landscape, which he describes over and over in various seasons and from various angles. (Such descriptions constitute the only longueurs in the book.) The alternation of the seasons, the rhythm of gardening, the regular rounds of the staff at the manor and of the nearby farmers gave a regularity and rhythm to Naipaul's own life that he had not known before. It was seductive, and productive—and not, finally, to last. As the years

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passed, death, disillusion, decay set in. Even in Wiltshire, the bush advances, creeping in on civilization, and ultimately bringing ruin. The following passage sums up Naipaul's feelings toward the end of his stay in his cottage and also illustrates what I have in mind when I speak of his conservative temperament:

> The very kind of people who, in the great days of the manor, would have given of their best as carpenters, masons, bricklayers might have had ideas of beauty and workmanship and looked for acknowledgment of their skill and craft and pains, people of this sort now, sensing an absence of authority, an organization in decay, seemed to be animated by an opposite instinct: to hasten decay, to loot, to reduce to junk. And it was possible to understand how an ancient Roman factory-villa in this province of Britain could suddenly, after two or three centuries, simply with a letting-go authority, and not with the disappearance of a working population, crumble into ruin, the secrets of the building and its modest technologies, for so long so ordinary, lost.

Civilization, for Naipaul, is a fragile thing, always in peril. Rural England, in his reading, is rather like Trinidad, or East Africa, or India; without the authority of tradition, it is, like every other place in the world, under siege by rot and at the mercy of rotters. In Naipaul's writing generally, there is a great, not ever fully expressed, longing for a society where he can cease the struggle, come to rest, feel at home. Although a British citizen, he remains, spiritually, a stateless soul, yearning for a society that the modern world just may not be able to provide. It is one of Naipaul's great themes, and perhaps the principal sadness of his life.

The Enigma of Arrival is a book about a journey, Naipaul's journey as writer and man, yet a journey still far from over. One feels this to be very much a transitional book, marking a turn in Naipaul's career. "As you get older," he once told an interviewer, "the work gets more difficult because the writing inevitably becomes more complex." But it only becomes more complex, one needs to insert, if you become a better writer, smarter and more impressed with the complexities of life. The enigma of Naipaul's own arrival has not been completely solved, and now, given the kind of restless writer he is, it will soon be time for fresh departures. Will he next write about life in the United States, in Europe, in the portion of the world that lives under Communism? Will his writing turn increasingly inward, in the manner of *The Enigma of Arrival*? Whatever he does next I take to be of the most serious consequence, for this man, the grandson of an indentured laborer, the son of an unsuccessful island journalist, is far and away the most talented, the most truthful, the most honorable writer of his generation.

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Notes on photography
by W. S. Di Piero

In its childhood photography was already a memory garden of antiquities. Many of the earliest images were of ancient ruins and religious monuments in exotic locales, like Captain Linnaeus Tripe's huge monochromes of the palace in Madura, India, taken in 1856, or Francis Firth's pictures of the pyramids and the Temple of Karnak. The subjects were in part determined by the limited technology of the view camera, with its delicate, chemically treated plates that required long exposures. But when we look at a picture like Maxime du Camp's *The Colossus of Abu Simbel,* where a human figure slouches minutely against the shoulder of the huge pharaonic pile as a measure of its immensity, we feel some of that rapture for mass which early photographers must have experienced. The desire to "view" a piece of civilized antiquity or ancient wilderness was also a memory act to interrupt the procession of the world before the eye and ritualize its moments. Photography intervened more purely and innocently than painting because it took material reality as its form language. The physical scene, received by the ground glass and fixed on a support, could then be reviewed. Natural forms were thus restored in memory by a new kind of representation, new because it was more an act of transmission than of transformation. The new representation was a fossil language.

One of the first tropisms of the photographic imagination was toward the race's earliest memories, the relations between mortals and gods. Any tropism is articulated by the view framed by the image-maker. In Firth's pictures of Egyptian monuments, in Carleton Watkins's and Eadweard Muybridge's photos of the Yosemite wilderness, we see preserved an archaic vision of the universe's design: the ether separated from the underworld by the earth platform on which the work of civilization is enacted. Men like Firth and du Camp were, I realize, "just making pictures," and having an adventurous time of it, too. Yet when I look at those old monochrome prints I'm convinced that the instinct behind that documentarian activity was to steal out of time the image of a relation time itself has determined. John B. Greene's *Algeria, Village and Cliffs of Constantine,* taken around 1856, shows a village running along the narrow shelf of a high cliff; that human construct meant to relieve the terrors of contingency and necessity occupies a tremendous pressurized space, spread like sacrificial offering between sky and earth. The village is an image of mediating human consciousness and of its interventions grown (or, as it looks in the picture, erupted or oozed) from those two forces. It's a vision of the episode in a genesis story when mortals contrive their first habitations between the sky gods and the sunless corridors of the underworld.

One early American genesis is narrated in Timothy H. O'Sullivan's *Indian Pueblo, Zuni, New Mexico, View from the South* (1873). The Zuni structures seem momen-

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tary resolutions of necessity built upon sacred earth. Ladders run like pickets along the terraces of stacked adobe apartments, and thatched lean-tos spike heavenward across our line of vision. The image prints the religious consciousness of the tribe. One version of the Zuni genesis tells how the sky god *Awonawilona,* mixing his flesh with water, compounded into existence Mother Earth and Father Sky, who then conceived all life in the womb of the earth, out of which emerged the first human beings. O'Sullivan, manipulating the time-absorptive machinery of photography, fixes a memory of human tenancy and stewardship. He had worked earlier with Mathew Brady, and his picture *A Harvest of Death,* taken after the Battle of Gettysburg, is a terrible image of the devastations of that stewardship. The four corpses spread upon the stubble field seem not so long before shaped out of that same ground, and soon to be reabsorbed by it. To document and remember the death of nature is the correlative tropism to that of viewing genesis and the primordial relations of mortals to gods. One does not have to believe in divinity to believe in the way forms generated by the religious imagination have determined the directions and contents of consciousness.

Those photographers were enthralled, too, by the frontal, wholly available innocence of their subjects, and their craft was at such an early stage of development that their own curiosity inhaled some of that innocence. The drama the photographic image represented, then and now, was often that of the apparently unmediated encounter between photographer and subject. It wouldn't take very long for photography to become also the most brutally sardonic witness to that encounter. Certainly the memory and possibility of innocent witness still haunt the contemporary photographer. The most endearingly spooky image I've ever seen is one of the earliest, Fox Talbot's calotype *Articles of China,* done around 1840 and included in his pioneering book *The Pencil of Nature.* On the four shelves that occupy the frame sit cups, tureens, salt cellars, bowls, vases, and other bric-a-brac. A startling innocence beams forth from them, they are such pure offerings to the gaze of consciousness. Milk pitcher, squat crystal vases, ceramic figurines of a country lad and maiden holding flowers—they possess a presentness undisturbed by any history of use. The lad and maiden are utterly unsuggestive; they do not return our attention to the life of nature. No object has the enfolded flexed surfaces that might draw us into the life of those stilled forms. (Nearly a hundred years later, Edward Weston tried to establish precisely that invitation into the formal life of the image.) Talbot's little things arrive in their image-moment with no chronicle of use, no natural history. This purity of presence is another mystery photographers feel driven to document: the look of things as if they had never been seen before, never been possessed by consciousness. And yet most image-makers are equally compelled to derive from the given subject a singular, formative vision. One way we can get at any photographer's work, after we've identified the tropisms that guide him or her to certain subjects, is by trying to articulate the artist's inevitable disturbance of the primitive innocence of an object in its place.

Several years ago I saw a series of pictures of Chicago's deep tunnel project (a public-works euphemism for the world's biggest new sewer) taken by Patricia Evans. Down inside those huge vaulted channels, illumination is supplied by enormous beacon lamps that solarize the air. In Evans's pictures they create phosphorescent blasts that chafe against the tunnel workers, the heavy machinery, the ridged and buckled rock wall. She follows Lewis Hine in examining the situation of workers whose job is a sort of provisional interment, but unlike Hine, who was primarily a social reformer and documentarian, she is enthralled by the artificial incandescence played against the rock-bound dark. Her eye is keen on the life source of the overworld brought down there to help humans find their way as they go about the work of civilization. The cables

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that coil and shoot into the distance and across our line of vision are delicate, life-sustaining arteries. In a way, Evans's curiosity is disturbingly exclusive. It's not the conditions of the work that interest her so much as the declensions of light upon that task of making systematic use of a chaos. In one picture, taken from what must be a catwalk or elevator about forty feet high, several workers below have just walked out of a dark foreground into the shivering definitions of the middle-distance lamplight. Another worker is blotted out by the darkness except for the luminous coin of his hard hat. The massive rock bulking everywhere at the illuminated perimeters at once stops light's progress and gnaws back at it.

The great predecessor of Evans and Hine was Nadar, who in 1862 made a series of images of the Paris sewers and catacombs. (He really drew the compass of the photographic enterprise: he also took the first aerial photographs.) Nadar's tropism, the direction of *his* imagination, was not so much toward the light source transported (at great expense and, in 1862, superhuman effort) from the overworld, but the look of the space where man-made contrivances—the struts, frames, and braces that organize the underworld for practical use—resolve to oblivion. In one image we see lopsided archways telescoped down toward a nearly perfect rectangle of blackness. That's the compositional center around which all the human interventions are tensed. In Evans's work the light is seen as a constant, necessary scouring against the encroachments of rock; in Nadar's the light is sucked away by the void at the center of those braces. Since the very activity of drilling and gouging channels in the earth and constructing formal passageways, apertures, clarifiers, and retainers is an analogue for intellection, both image-makers are giving form to the desire to know.

The human arrangements down there are provisional, and photographers who make the descent are archivists of disarray. The starkness with which photography represents disorder (or the absence of an order imposed by intellect) is always more charged and shocking because it works with the given fact of the scene. A painter seeks to master subject. A photographer's work depends on the willingness to be mastered by what's given. In Nadar's own time, as if to close the circuit of vision photography would henceforth command and investigate, American photographers like Watkins and Muybridge were acting as archivists of the pristine jumbled orders of the wilderness. In Watkins's images especially we see at once how diversity—the smallest inflections of mass, height, and girth in a stand of pines—resolves into magnificent likenesses. Within the blocked-out uniformities of pines are countless minuscule differentiations of sunlight stripping and exposing the textures of bark, branch, canopy, needle. The tangled disarray of untouched wilderness presents itself as huge jarring harmonies. In Watkins's images of Yosemite, so different from the obsessively self-conscious magnitudes and exaggerated epiphanies of Ansel Adams's work, the sharply defined entanglements of moss, grass, stream bed, brush, and gully create a webwork that strikes the eye as a haphazard interfusedness so meticulously designed that the mind, acquainted with contingency and becoming, strains against that vision. What is conspicuously not knit into that world-stuff is the human figure. When he appears in Watkins's images, he looks like a not very bountiful sack of potatoes, all sags and burlap bulges. Like the human figure slouched against du Camp's Colossus, he's there only as a mindful, disharmonious, puny measure of the earth and sky.

One of the revelatory enterprises of photography has been to see the human figure as material reality grown out of or worked into a place, rather than merely inserted there as a measure of the surround. Some of the most astute and unforgiving visions have come from photographers like Robert Frank and Paul Strand, who were just as much strangers to their subjects as were Firth, du Camp, and Greene. When I first saw Robert Frank's *The Americans* in the early 1960s, its

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images had already acquired an almost primitive religious force among college students like myself. We passed around our one battered copy, narrated and quarreled over its images, whose disquieting guilelessness seemed not irony but a roughed-up innocence. The locales were nearly as exotic as Lampur and Madura: Arizona, New Orleans, Mississippi and (for a South Philadelphian like me) Hoboken. And yet for all the moody angularity of the images we recognize the forms of a distinctly American feeling, perhaps because as a people we feel as if we are always arriving at new recognitions of our strangenesses. Frank, of course, was a European, a Swiss. His images were made in a kind of permanent exile, and he eventually went off to settle in Nova Scotia, land's end.

Another book we read and quarreled over as if it were revelation was *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men,* less for the too meticulous pathos of James Agee's prose than for Walker Evans's pictures of impoverished Alabama tenant farmers. Evans's vision was more concentrated and "naturalized" than Frank's. He documented faces whose adult ages were often impossible to guess, the result of a cruel system of using the earth. The emotional register in those pictures is intense but narrow, since their effects are so exclusively determined by moral selectivity and reformist impulse. (We see the same narrowness in Lewis Hine, and for the same reasons.) Frank's pictures were not of a specific economy or society under duress. They range across class and racial lines, landscapes, social groups, public and private events and ceremonies. The tones are more mixed, therefore, and vexing. I think Frank actually saw more in his viewfinder, or allowed a wider possibility for what might be given, because he was most of all concerned with the action of forms on the photographic paper. And this is the essential liberation from the documentarian purpose. Walker Evans's pictures have an evangelical force, and they memorialize a particular kind of hunger and want in its historical setting. But it is Robert Frank who possessed the more innocent, inquiring, visionary eye.

I recently saw again, after many years, a large print of Frank's *U.S. 66, Arizona.* It struck me as an image that must have entered my dream life, it seemed immediately so familiar yet unaccommodated, something once slipped from memory now vividly restored. Great photographic images perform this sort of visitation more keenly than paintings because the representational forms are printed directly from the forms in nature. They come more immediately onto our nervous system. *U.S. 66, Arizona* looked now like a modified version or "imitation" of O'Sullivan's Gettysburg picture, though all the horror in Frank's image—the scene is a highway traffic accident—broods in the folds of the blanket that covers the victim's body stretched across the broad central foreground. Behind the body stand five people, each angled slightly differently toward the corpse, each attitude disclosing a way of receiving the event, a ceremonialism of feeling. They stare at the blanket. No one weeps. Behind them, in the distance, an architectural procession spans frontier history: a 1950s ranch house with a picture window and venetian blinds; left of it, the mouth of a garage; then a squatter, older, more makeshift house; then a structure that looks to be an outhouse, and next to it a tumbledown wooden shack.

The structures, contrived to cope with necessity, graph the civilization built in the wilderness by people like those in the picture. But like the five figures, like the telephone wires that high and faintly skim the horizon in the background, those structures are snowed over by woolly flecks, like windblown chaff or weed dust, that not only come to rest in the solid stuff of the blanket covering the corpse but also swarm from it.

Fox Talbot said that his china cabinet calotype was better than a written inventory, for if the collection were stolen the picture would be "mute testimony" to its reality and contents. It would be "evidence of a novel kind," a record of an existence. A little later in the century, the public equivalent of such witness was Atget's grand project of photo-

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graphing the old and new Paris. Once the cabinet's contents leave their niche, their household museum, they become commodities whose assigned values may be documented. With Atget, photography became the witness and transcriber of economic relations and of the commodity life of objects. Many of the 10,000 pictures he took were of the new Paris created by Baron Haussmann, Napoleon III's prefect of the Seine. By 1870, one fifth of Paris's streets were Haussmann's creation, and more than a quarter million of the city's inhabitants had been displaced by the destruction of old buildings. A new economic order was emerging. The manufacture and merchandising of objects were consolidated into more centralized operations; large-scale suppliers assembled goods speedily for large retail outlets. In *The Painting of Modern Life,* T. J. Clark describes this change as one form of capital replacing another. The change was mounted and displayed in the windows of the *grands magasins* which by 1870 had created their own "views" for Parisians to study and absorb. Those frames presented and enclosed objects of desire.

The nature of Atget's witness, however, is more complex than his predecessors could have imagined, because of the peculiar mediating quality of the shop window, the squinting view of commerce. The glass that clarifies the objects of desire also reflects images of the social matrix outside, the larger historically determined context. In many of Atget's images of shop windows, the street scene swims in the middle distance of the glass. We see not only the objects of desire but also their "support," where often the monumental processional stones of Haussmann's Paris lie imprinted on the image of the new shared public life of desire. But it's a glass support. Atget, in documenting the new life of capital, dramatized the transparency of prohibition when we confront things we desire.

Constellated, the images become complex witness to the new system of dependencies, of plenitudes and deprivations. The prosperity that ignites and sustains desire, announced in so many of the pictures Atget's tremendous archivist passion drove him to take, is pinched by images he made in 1912 of plump overdressed prostitutes outside their cribs, and of the mean shanties of the *chiffoniers* and the coach-cart dwellings of *zaniers*; these were some of the populations who had been literally marginalized, pushed to the city's outskirts, by Haussmann's demolitions and by the new wealth that was driving up rents. Atget's encyclopedist zeal resulted in a photo-history of the economic processes implicit in free-market prosperity. I don't mean that his images are illustrational. They are representations of stress patterns the photographer saw as he spent those many years moving literally from the old Paris to the new, corner by corner, quarter by quarter. It helps to see images like *Bitumiers* and *Paveurs,* the badly paid work gangs wreathed in vapor who paved the way for the century's new automobiles (Haussmannization, Clark says, made fast fortunes for manufacturers of tar macadam), in proximity with an image like *Boutique automobile, avenue de la Grande Armée,* taken in 1924. Behind the welcoming glass façade stands a new car, broadside, its spare hanging from a fender like an earring; two other models face parade-front. Bold white lettering claws across the glass: OCCASIONS CHENARD RENAULT. The cars are already museum spooks rendered nearly transparent in the glare of the glass.

In its function of bearing witness, photography can deliver to us—more piercingly than we are often prepared for—the hard solid presentness of material civilization as memorial to itself. When the photographic image recalls the substance of material reality, it delivers also the immaterial wraith or larva of that substance. Atget's image not only implicates the vehicles on display but also the pavers and streetworkers and steelworkers, and the glazier, and the sign painter whose newly created job was to enhance the glazier's work by naming the new objects of desire and who did so in the hope that he too might enter the cycle, obtain such an object, enlist his energies in that

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system of dependencies. The image is particularly disturbing because in the window, on the support, are reflected the sidewalk trees. In the spectral depths of the treetops where they diminish toward a point deep in the image, we see autumnal decay, the sparse leafage and branches that seem to grow into and through those lovely gawky machines.

The street vendors Atget photographed around the turn of the century hold their own place in the system of change. He saw them as already casualties of the new capital and haunting vestiges of the old. The man in *Marchand abut-jours* bears a basket crammed with tiny lampshades slung from his back, a counterweight to the body's effort to stand erect. You can see traced there (as if Atget were applying a stylus) the tensile strength of the spine laboring to heft, and not be rolled back by, the weight of his wares. The tension of the new capital replacing the old is felt even more palpably in the famous 1899 image of the ragpicker, where the counterweight, balanced like a scale behind the subject, are bales of rags stacked to nearly twice his height, a coordinate image to those of small humans posing next to mighty heaps of stone. The ragpicker's wares are proliferating at a staggering rate. (If you spend too long looking at Atget's shopfront pictures, with all those blouses, shoes, petticoats, corsets, trousers, hats, gloves, shawls, you're liable to feel department-store vertigo, or nausea.) But his very livelihood is at the same time being outdistanced by the new consolidations of scrap collecting. My favorite image of the passing of the old economy is the *Marchand de paniers de fil de fer,* whose metal cages bubble and foam down the length of his entire arm. They make for a buoyancy that weighs him down. And his face is nearly obliterated by the round puff of pipe smoke blooming from his lips. He's exhaling a cage of smoke.

Photography's alertness to relations between the human subject and its context has an erotic intensity. The camera, both receiver and transmitter, determines that the piece of physical reality selected by the image-maker will be documented before or while other inventive activities are exercised upon it. A photographer's imagination more than a painter's is crucially defined by its selectivity and discrimination, and its exclusiveness is like a lover's fanatical attention. In straight photography the receiving is more immediately determinant, because more vulnerable, than the transmission. The shape of feeling created by an image may be completed even before the subject is made over into an image. In his *Daybooks* entry for April 24, 1930, Edward Weston wrote: "I start with no preconceived idea—discovery excites me to focus—then rediscovery through the lens—final form or presentation seen on ground glass, the finished print previsioned complete in every detail of texture, movement, proportion, *before exposure*—the shutter's release automatically and finally fixes my conception, allowing no after manipulation—the ultimate end, the print, is but a duplication of all that I saw and felt through my camera."

The image-existence of a black-and-white photo is obtained by exiling matter's primary visual quality, color; a photo doesn't so much copy its subject as it takes an imprint of its sketchwork. When we see a news picture showing us the death of the body, the pathos is piercing but forgettable: although we recognize at once the exact "print" of the event, of death's actuality, the signs of the life of the flesh have already fled from the image.

We remember many of our century's events in black-and-white images. Their archival accuracy exceeds that of previous forms of visual documentation—paintings, coins, graphics, tapestries. Photography can also process magnitudes. And yet, like those other forms, it has become inevitably conventionalized as a representation merely. The historical imagination, which is the way consciousness represents past reality to itself, has absorbed perhaps too quickly these new abstractions. What if the pictures of the death camps and of Hiroshima and Nagasaki preserved some facsimile of the look of the flesh? How would that affect our

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recognition and memory of the horror? (Has the documentation in color photographs of the Vietnam war made our consciousness of that bloodshed different from that of previous wars?) In 1857, when sepia images were the norm, the Goncourt brothers, who themselves sat for a portrait by Nadar, declared: "Everything is becoming black in this century; photographs are the black clothing of things." The ceremonialism of black-and-white images has become so central and commonplace in our lives that we accept familiarly in pictures what our imagination unassisted would resist. Black leaves, black water, black roses. Or the reverse. In Minor White's visionary landscapes—they are really meditations on nature's forms, whose essence he sought to expose on film—trees are blanched, solarized to cottony white, not as if they lack or wanted color but as if all color had rushed to those green lives with such force and concentration as to vaporize them.

And yet, black-and-white photography can powerfully reveal the shaping streams around the human figure. Like Robert Frank, Paul Strand did his best work when he was stranger to the place. A 1933 image from Mexico, *Woman, Patzcuaro,* presents a peasant with a broad Indian face sitting in three-quarters profile, back to a wall, a long shawl wrapped around her head and draped down over her shoulder. Her blouse, torn and patched, the basket she holds, and the white cloths fluffing from the basket form a visual commonwealth. The weave in each article is startlingly pronounced. The patterns define her material existence and also contain it. Even the speckled plaster wall behind her looks like an unraveling knitwork. She is woven into her place in time. Like most of the portraits Strand did in Mexico and Italy, that image is a pressurized environment. We see the action of the world on the subject.

Strand liked to use the framing rhetoric of windows, doors, and gates to double the pressure already created by the vulnerable, selective housing of the viewfinder. Probably the best known of these is *The Family* (Luzzara, Italy, 1953), where the variety of expressions of poverty fold out beyond the definitions of the funereal doorframe. The gazes of the mother and her five grown sons (who are barefoot, their trouser legs rolled up) are cast in different directions. Each gaze—defiant, wistful, confused, surrendering—expresses a different way of absorbing circumstance. In *Women of Santa Ana,* two young women, one with a babe in arms, are framed in a courtyard gate. They look rooted there, held, though not trapped, since the energy of the space is not constraining. It's the frame of material necessity that holds them. The look on their faces, as in most of the Mexican portraits and certainly in *The Family,* is barren of expectancy, futureless, with nothing migratory about it. A straight photographer like Strand lives unequivocally in the country of the seeable, of what's merely given, and what he sees is the substance of flesh in the stream of its place. But that is also part of the natural history of photography: the pang we feel when looking at snapshots of dead loved ones is partly due to that rush of presentness, of seeing a father, friend, child, in the world-stream while we're locked to the knowledge that the person has disappeared.

The mood of most fashion photography is migratory, a readiness to escape necessity or pretend it does not exist. I feel that mood in the portraiture of Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus, and Cindy Sherman. Avedon's images practically quiver with the anxiety to flee the material present toward a future, any future. His subjects are posed without a world-stream. The shaping forces are instead internal, eruptive, florid, as they are in much of Diane Arbus's work. In her extreme close-up of *A young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C., 1966,* we can see the plucked stubble beneath the skinny black gull's wings of the young man's penciled eyebrows. An identity is being coaxed into being; the man is "at home" in the self he is designing, since there's not much material context in the picture. In *Tattooed Man at a carnival, Md., 1970,* the matted filaments of

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hair on the man's chest and abdomen look like they've sprouted from the animal and bird tattoos there. The tattoos look as if they bloomed from his blood, or appeared the way a photographic image appears in a chemical bath. Arbus often selected her subjects because they were decorated or disguised by circumstances rather than inhabiting them. Even the famous image, *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970,* is essentially a domestic context turned into theatrical artifice; the image is shaped so that it seems a display window or sideshow platform. Cindy Sherman goes even farther. Her self-portraiture as different personalities in different "stagings" is expressly theatrical, and it's the manner of impersonation that is the real subject of her images. The impersonation, the melodrama of self-consciousness, has greater plasticity when she uses crushed, dreggy colors, because the colors intensify the unreality of the presentation.

These kinds of images borrow from fashion photography the primacy of arranged or carefully determined contexts. And the human subject is often selected because it is "dressed," as a movie set is "dressed." The figure must volatilize all suggestion of necessity so that it may stand as something triumphantly singular, free of contingency, and therefore essentially worldless. It is the purest expression of irreligion, since its presentation of the human cannot allow for any suggestion of emergence from something greater (or more inclusive) than itself. In its skittish present, the fashion figure colonizes everything around it. I recently saw a very large print of an image of a slaughterhouse worker from Avedon's *In the American West* (1985). It's an example of the kind of workingmen photography practiced by Hine made over into fashion photography. A wiry, Oriental figure in a spattered apron strikes the familiar Avedon pose, at once confrontational and disengaged. He has a pigsticker and other tools stuck in his belt. He's embellished, dressed, with the bloody residues of his job, but against the white backdrop he has no context to stream him into the nature of his work. He's exiled, history-less, utterly abstract. The title, his name, "Blue Cloud Wright," suggesting in fact a long, troubled, perhaps deeply religious racial history, is a smug enhancement: the irony sits on the picture waiting for some intelligible, enlivening context. But the more exact purpose behind the presentation lies in that pigsticker, the tattoos, the leather apron, the gore dripping from the subject's fingertips, all of which have the singularized, fragmentary insularity of belts, earrings, shoes, or watches in a fashion spread.

Arbus's figures are less orphaned, to be sure, and their poses are attempts at emergence. In so much of her work we see people—lovers, circus performers, street people, transvestites, a "Lady Bartender at home with a souvenir dog" or "Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park"—overcontrolling their bodies, striking poses which the camera receives as near mockeries of fashion modeling. But there is always the felt sense that those ritualized poses, those aggrieved self-enhancements reaching out toward the inquiring lens of the camera, are the gestures of humans who suffer such strain living in the present that they would flee it so as not to be damned or abandoned to its contingencies. Her finest and most disquieting images are those made in 1970 and 1971 of Downs Syndrome patients. They are presented mostly out-of-doors, in Halloween or bathing costumes. The images have a softened, almost pictorialist glaze. Because the figures possess such uncertain motor control, and lack therefore the ritualized self-possession of most of Arbus's subjects, their spastic, overcommitted jubilance seems an agony. They suffer the present with no thought of flight.

The workers in the depressed smokestack towns of Ohio and Pennsylvania which Lee Friedlander photographed in 1979-1980 are possessed of a somnolent patience. A welder slouches nonchalantly across his workbench; in gray coveralls, wearing a slit-eye mask, he looks like a post-industrial

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gnome or miner-dwarf, a completely subterranean creature, and yet the torch he's holding shoots brief white acetylene wings. In another image, a man and woman stand with numbed watchfulness behind the square iron mouth of a drop forge, arms raised in a ritualized, almost matrimonial gesture. Though they are framed by the machine's aperture, nothing suggests they are trapped in their activity; their look is one of effortless disinterestedness, neither crushed nor redeemed by work. Their composure in fact has more in common with the portraits of middle-class professionals that August Sander made in Germany during the early decades of the century than with conventional American workingmen photography. This side of the drop forge lies a glittering puddle of identical, punched-out slugs. Friedlander views his workers as fully implicated in their labor but aware that its uniform products pass beyond them. It's a professional's awareness. The system of material relations—the interdependence of worker, machine, and product, an extension of the new capital that Atget documented—is quietly stated, while crucial discriminations are held intact: the workers are not automatons, and their activity is not represented as grindingly reductive or demeaning. What we see in the racial and sexual variety of workers at various tasks, however, is a form of human industry vanishing from the American economy. The images make very clear that while they are doing the work of a civilization, the world context (figured forth in the messy, underpopulated shops where the work is done) is changing dramatically. The form of capital, if it is not being replaced, is at least being severely redefined.

One image in particular, of the most apparently innocuous scene, offers a summative vision of changed relations as astute and as "innocently" archivist as anything by Atget. The statue of a World War I soldier stands profiled before a VFW or American Legion post. The flagpole behind him, from our view, grows straight up out of his breastbone. At his back, to the right, in doughy white sky, a rank of smokestacks looms like a quote of Weston's famous *Armco Steel.* Across from the bronze soldier are beefy American cars parked in front of shabby redbrick and tarshingle buildings. Deep left is another factory, its presence announced by boulders of smoke in the distance. On the meridian dividing that factory activity from the rest of the image is a SUZUKI billboard. The soldier, crimped coppery highlights chipping across the folds of his uniform, has the easeful, exaggerated purposefulness of official martial images. But that ceremonial regard for high moral purpose and civil restorations is bristled all around by images of actual material contingencies. The emphatic SUZUKI message stands as an admonition to the older, manufacturing-based, economic order memorialized in that statue, one whose dismantling was already well underway in 1979, when Friedlander took his pictures. His welders, drop-forge operators, wire-rollers, small-parts assemblers, and all the rest are trying to hold their place in an economy's debris. Their professional regard, so explicit in the images, is an expression of their knowledge that their labor is practically obsolete. The answering images in the series are the weedy, desolate autumnal and wintry landscapes in those towns—the series is entitled *Factory Valleys*—where even the natural order looks like scrap that must be either collected or allowed to rust away.

Edward Weston's *Armco Steel, Ohio, 1922,* is in the family of images that present human industry as a mediating activity between terrestrial and celestial constraints.[1] The smokestacks above the mill rise like church spires

1 Many of the Weston photographs discussed in this essay may be seen in "Edward Weston: A Centennial Retrospective," a travelling exhibition which originated at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in November 1986 and which will be on display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York from September 15 through October 31. A catalogue accompanying the exhibition is entitled *Supreme Instants: The Photography of Edward Weston,* written by Beaumont Newhall and published by the New York Graphic Society (237 pages, $25).

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or *campanili,* an expression not of religious aspiration but of commodity desire. The foreground stacks are voluminous, solid; deeper into the image the duplicated forms begin to melt into air. The picture is famous in Weston's development because its direct presentation of the subject marked his turn from pictorialism to straight photography. The early portraits were conventionally pictorialist "stagings"; usually the human figure served as a light receptor inserted among mansard wedges of shadow. In *Epilogue* (1918), a woman holding a fan is caught in a trapezoid of shade on which are pressed darker, grittier shadows of two vases with tall leggy flowers. It's a preciously wrought essay on the way light's aggressions are deflected and absorbed by matter. Although he declared his conversion in 1926 with the remark, "Once my aim was interpretation, now it is presentation," I don't think the change was as absolute as Weston claimed. He never entirely abandoned the pictorialist's willfulness regarding the arranged drama of a subject; at the same time, even in the early pictorialist work there was already the straight photographer's alertness to the stress lines of physical reality. The result was a peculiarly exegetical, sometimes too studious, curiosity about the givenness of subject matter.

Weston's career acts out what I take to be the two essential melodramas of photography: that of the Designer, who cultivates a manner of seeing that is an intentional manipulation of the subject in accordance with some predetermined vision of beauty or good order; and that of the Seeker, who waits for the subject to reveal its mysteries so that he may, as Weston himself said, "grasp that intangible something that haunts my ground glass." Both are melodramas because no sensible artist works by such narrowing determinist expectations. But as general dispositions they suggest the brilliant irresoluteness I've always felt in Weston's work. He in fact wrote scripts for both melodramas in his voluminous *Daybooks,* which document his own fluctuations as he negotiates his way among various instincts and purposes. In 1924, for instance, he wrote that "the camera should be used for the recording of life, for rendering the very structure and quintessence of the *thing itself,* whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh." He's speaking for the documentarian, inquisitive impulses of straight photography and the clarities it can reveal; essence is not an occult quality, it's fully disclosed in the appearances of a thing recorded by the camera. And yet in 1929 he can also say that "subject matter is immaterial—the approach to the subject, the way it is seen and recorded is the critical test of a worker." Here it's not the act of receiving and recording the thing itself that matters, it's the manner of the seeing. I think it was this odd marriage of mannerist and confrontational photography that pushed Weston toward abstraction during his later career.

In many of Weston's images of Mexico from the 1920s we can see the way in which, even as he pursued his conversion to straight photography, he internalized and found a different expression for his pictorialist instincts. In *Pissing Indian* (also called *Calley Mayor,* Tepotzotlán, 1924), the human figure, viewed slantwise from above, is isolated by the intersecting lines and planes of the road, the dirt plot abutting the road, the brickwork of the building, and the stone slabs leaning against the wall. In *Casa de Vecindad* II, 1926, bright shirts and linens lie on the ground and hang from tiers of clothesline strung across a courtyard. Both photographs confront their subjects in the unassisted, unmanipulated method of straight photography, but both are also rather self-consciously determined by the extreme angularity of view and are dominated by the abstract patterns laid down by the gridwork in each. The selectivity of manner eclipses the other deliberations engaged in making the image. Some of the pulquería pictures show the same strain. In *Two Children in front of a Landscape,* the children at the bottom of the frame (they look deposited there) are dwarfed by the mural of a lush, hilly landscape with a farmhouse in the background. It's at once presentational and

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interpretive, though the intervention is enacted through selectivity and angle of response. The too available irony is not only that the (presumably impoverished) children are minuscule in the presence of that imagination of wealth, of a *latifundia,* but that the imagination itself decorates a cheap bar where the parents of such children would be expected to drink. Weston said that he did his pulquería series "before I ever heard of Atget," with whom he was compared; their work, in any event, was different, Weston explained, because Atget was "a great documentary photographer."

I've used the term pictorialist to set Weston's career in a formal context, but finally pictorialism or theatricalism is my perhaps injudicious way of identifying the roots of what I believe was the mastering impulse in Weston's work: the making of an image-existence, the self-conscious *putting* of a representation into a refined, completed state. This might describe the ambition of different sorts of photographers, but for Weston it meant that formal ritualization took precedence over everything else, and this meant sacrificing some of the powers inherent in the "mere presentation" of straight photography. Many of his pictures of natural phenomena, for example, express awe or passion, but those expressions exist in the image as quotations of feeling rather than as immediate, sustained, self-restoring *acts.* The mysteries of innocence have been bred out of them, as they have not been bred out of images by Robert Frank, or Minor White, who intervened even more radically in the realization of his images but whose sense of formal refinement wasn't subject to the ritualized restraints found in Weston's work. Weston's sense of form was often so self-consciously theatrical that he could not achieve as often as he hoped that expressiveness of emotion in line, volume, and texture which Matisse regarded as the essence of form. (It was Matisse who, when asked by Stieglitz to contribute some remarks on photography to *Camera Work,* replied: "Photography should register and give us documents.") Nor is it finally the raw presence of the "thingness" of the world that unequivocally claimed Weston's imagination, as it seized O'Sullivan's, Atget's, and Nadar's. It was instead the conquest of what he called "the supreme instant" in which the subject was received, claimed, worked, completed.

By 1930 Weston had arrived at his understanding of the photographic image as analogue, not copy, of his subjects, and this freed him to pursue more ambitiously the life of natural forms. His investigations also drove him to push the image beyond resemblance, beyond subject matter. Of one of his pepper images he wrote that it is "more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter . . . . This new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind." The pepper images don't transport me in that way, because the forms are too bound by conventional sculptural definitions already developed by Rodin, Brancusi, and Matisse. Weston (who justifiably hated being compared to painters and sculptors, as I'm doing) had an answer to my complaint: "Actually I have proved, through photography, that Nature has all the 'abstract' (simplified) forms Brancusi or any other artist can imagine. With my camera I go direct to Brancusi's *source.* I find *ready to use,* select and isolate, what he has to 'create.'" He is here announcing again, I think, the two magisterial prerogatives of photography: to document purely, preserving and recording subject matter as primordial evidence; and to pass through the veil of resemblance into the life of inner form "beyond subject matter," which can be achieved only in the image-existence. The great realization of this, at least for me, comes not in the pepper images but in the cutaway views of vegetables. In the fleshy corrugations of *Kale Halved,* or the moist, circuitous canals of *Onion Halved,* or the vulval feathering of *Artichoke Halved,* the presence of sheer vegetative force, of *physis,* is revealed in the actual documentary resemblance, which acts as a mysterious transparency. We also see gathered up and foliated into the form of the moment an entire history of growth. Subject matter in these

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pictures really does vanish, or rather phases in and out, in the presence of a force we certainly do not know in our conscious mind.

Those images also reveal the exertions of a Seeker investigating the quality of the analogy. It was his obsession with the formal perfections of the image that led him "inside" those onions and artichokes. What mattered finally was the photographic look of the thing, its imageness. His cloud studies of 1936 were the most enthusiastic and brilliant expression of that impulse. The tonal consistencies in any one image might run from flaked, jagged slate to silky marble. The textures of immateriality go from leather to rock to foam. In the cloud studies, and also in the images of those broad, eddying, scalloped stone formations at Point Lobos, Weston succeeds in expressing emotion with every nuance of line and light. His best subjects, in other words, were those that stood at the frontier where resemblance becomes abstract transparency.

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Reading Denis Donoghue

by Bruce Bawer

Denis Donoghue is one of that small company of transatlantic men of letters who have established reputations as distinguished critics of both English and American literature. An Irishman by birth, Donoghue has taught at University College, Dublin, at Cambridge University, and (currently) at New York University, where he occupies the Henry James Chair of Letters, and since 1959 has published a dozen volumes, including studies of Yeats, Swift, Emily Dickinson, modern verse drama, modern American poetry, and "the poetic imagination"; he is professionally concerned with the subject of Irishness (his last book, a selection of essays on his native land and literature, was entitled *We Irish*), and his new collection, *Reading America*[1]—a gathering of twenty-seven reviews and essays about American writers from Emerson to Ashbery—testifies to his equally serious interest in the question of just what it is that makes American literature American.

This question is most explicitly engaged in the book's opening essay, "America in Theory," in which Donoghue discusses some of the more familiar critical conceptions of the nature of "the American experience" as it is rendered in the national literature. Examining the writings of such diverse critics as Tocqueville, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, V.L. Parrington, Perry Miller, F.O. Matthiessen, W.H. Auden, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, Leo Marx, Alfred Kazin, and Harold Bloom (Donoghue is nothing if not a compulsive scholar), he attempts to formulate a sort of unified field theory of American literature. But he never settles down quite long enough to state this theory succinctly and with finality; he seems unwilling to commit himself to any particular formulation, and thus throughout the essay is continually bringing in new quotations, new authorities.

For instance, Donoghue paraphrases Irving Howe to the effect that "the deepest desire in American literature is to be rid of every authority except that of the individual self," quotes Quentin Anderson's suggestion that American literature is designed to help readers "to fantasize a guiltless possession of the world," and apprises us of Nina Baym's argument that "the myth of the American experience . . . sets the hero free to disengage himself from a society he regards as embodied in women and the responsibilities of domestic life." At one point Donoghue seems to be subsuming all of these theories into the single (and well-put) observation that "[i]t is the moral and rhetorical aim of American literature . . . to separate essence from existence, and to protect essence—or call it selfhood—from the vulgarity imposed by mere conditions." In other words, American writers are more likely than their European counterparts to be essentialists, more likely to consider inner (or spiritual) existence to be separable from

1 *Reading America: Essays on American Literature,* by Denis Donoghue; Knopf, 320 pages, $22.95.

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—if not more important or more interesting than—outer (or physical) reality. Having suggested this much, however, Donoghue proceeds to declare that "[a]n essentialist theory of American experience is . . . implausible," and to argue that "the American difference . . . arises from the incongruity between, on the one hand, a continent given over to commercial expansion and aggrandizement and, on the other, the promise of individualism and selfhood implicit in the once open expanse of virgin land."

What Donoghue seems to be saying here is that American literature tends to depict a tension between the forces of society and history and the lure of freedom, of unrestrained "selfhood." Many critics have observed this tension, though no two of them have described it in quite the same way, and different critics have convincingly emphasized different aspects of it; it is variously manifested as a conflict between city and wilderness, corruption and innocence, licit and illicit sexuality, marriage and bachelorhood, the company of women and the company of men, Europe and America, East and West, acquisitiveness and affection, the temporal and the eternal, intelligence and ignorance. (Which of these elements proves to be stronger, more virtuous, or more attractive than the other, however, varies from author to author.) This characterization of American literature is a wonderfully catholic one: it embraces everything from *The Scarlet Letter, Daisy Miller,* and the Leatherstocking novels to *Main Street, The Great Gatsby,* and *The House of Mirth.* Yet Donoghue does not do an effective job of setting forth this version of his theory; indeed, he barely nods in its direction before moving on to the somewhat different observation that American literature is concerned with "self and space, or self and nature," and that it represents an "attempt to understand man as such, free of social and historical contingencies." "Free"? Suddenly it seems as if Donoghue has given up the notion that American literature depicts a tension, and has decided instead that social and historical contingencies—far from existing in conflict with the urge toward freedom and "selfhood"—are to all intents and purposes nonexistent in American literature. Even this is not his final word on the subject, however. At the end of the essay—when he approvingly quotes Trilling's declaration that, Parrington to the contrary, a nation's culture "is not truly figured in the image of current," but that (in Donoghue's paraphrase) "the form of its existence is struggle"—Donoghue seems to return to the notion that American literature tends to portray, not freedom from "social and historical contingencies," but a struggle between a longing for such freedom and a helplessness in the face of such contingencies.

In short, Donoghue's essay does not come to anything resembling a clear conclusion in regard to a theory of American literature. On the essay's penultimate page, in fact, he speaks with apparent disdain of "the ferocious lucidity of a theory," as if to say that it is fun to play around with theories, but to settle down with one—and to declare plainly one's allegiance to it—is positively beastly. This position, to the present critic's mind, seems a bit too close for comfort to the gamesmanship of Derrida & Co.

What is no less lamentable than Donoghue's theoretical tergiversation is his deviation into politics. He begins the essay's concluding paragraphs by posing a question that seems to appear—in more senses than one—from out of left field: "to what extent does our professional interest in American literature, and our participation in State Department cultural enterprises, commit us to general sympathy with the aims of an American administration?" Donoghue says that at the 1975 Salzburg conference on American Studies which inspired the piece, this question was not entertained, but adds that "[i]t would have to arise if we were to assemble at Salzburg now: April 12, 1986." The remaining sentences of the essay are so remarkable that I feel obliged to quote them in their entirety:

> We would have to find some courteous method [he continues] of indicating that while

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> we remained professionally concerned with American literature, and therefore with the society it expresses, we do not feel bound to approve this official policy or that. It is clear that President Reagan's foreign policy, in its bearing upon Nicaragua, El Salvador, Libya, and other countries, arises with appalling directness from a vision of America's destiny in the world. It is impossible to distinguish a vision from a theory in this context. The President's private war with the duly elected government of Nicaragua is his version, righteous and unquestioning, of the theory of America as Redeemer Nation. It is not even necessary for him to say that he regards America's destiny as one of saving the world from Communism: it is a matter of course. His more immediate problem is to convince millions of Americans that their security is threatened by the existence of one form of government rather than another in Nicaragua.
>
> The easiest way, for a student of American literature, is to keep literature separate from a President's missionary zeal. I have no gift to set this statesman right. Perhaps it is enough to keep the political consequences of an inherited vision in mind, and to let it darken one's lucidity from time to time.

There are many things about the above passage that deserve comment, but I will confine myself to marveling at Donoghue's astonishing contradiction. If he genuinely does believe in keeping literature separate from politics, then what in heaven's name is this political jeremiad doing at the end of an essay on literary theory? The smug self-righteousness that is manifest here surfaces elsewhere in *Reading America*—and, for that matter, has surfaced not infrequently in Donoghue's other books. "I don't disavow an occasional inclination to set statesmen right," he admitted (note the similar phrasing) in the introduction to *We Irish,* but went on to claim that "[p]rofessionally, I am concerned with politics only when it invades literature and prescribes the gross conditions under which poems, plays, stories, and novels are written." May one be forgiven for finding this hard to believe?

But enough about "America in Theory," which after all is only one of ten pieces included in the first of *Reading America*'s two sections, under the rubric "Essays." (As distinguished, that is, from the "Brevities"—a euphemism for "reviews"—that are collected in section two.) The other nine pieces in the section—one of them previously unpublished, two of them originally included in the *Times Literary Supplement,* and the remainder first published in *Festschriften* and in such small-circulation journals as *Salmagundi, Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* and the *Sewanee Review*—take as their topics some of the major figures in American literature: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Henry Adams, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Lionel Trilling. As a rule, these pieces are overlong, stuffy, dull, pretentious, and a great deal more confusing than they need to be. "Emerson at First," for instance, is a twenty-page, chapter-by-chapter synopsis of *Nature* in which Donoghue manages to work in references to Valéry, Stevens, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Schiller, Henry James, Yeats, Hegel, Winters, and Swedenborg, among others, most of which references seem designed less to illuminate Emerson (whom Donoghue, by the way, has discussed more interestingly, and more briefly, in his book *Connoisseurs of Chaos*) than to throw all but the most industrious, sympathetic, and intellectually agile readers off the track. (Donoghue is the sort of critic who likes to behave as if his readers are intimately familiar with materials that he *knows* they aren't intimately familiar with.) "Thoreau" (which appears to be an expanded version of a review of the Library of America's Thoreau volume and Sharon Cameron's 1985 study *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*) seems, for most of its length, to be little more than a collocation of biographical facts and critical quotations; it is not until the last paragraph that Donoghue makes it clear that he has indeed, in a roundabout way, been developing a thesis—namely, that "[i]t is only in language, and not even in Nature, that Thoreau is content to reside." It is typical of Don-

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oghue not to have put this sentence earlier in the piece, and saved us all a good deal of puzzlement.

"Whitman" is better. Though Donoghue devotes much of this thirty-page essay to a largely incoherent attempt to make Whitman's various metaphysical pronouncements cohere, he has some worthwhile things to say about Whitman's poetry. For example: "Whitman's favourite subject is movement, process, becoming: no wonder he loved bridges and ferries, which kept things moving while defining relationships, one thing with another." And: "To get the beauty of Whitman's poetry hot, one must read it in long, rolling stretches. No poet is less revealed in the single phrase, the image, or even the line. The unit of the verse is indeed the phrase, a loose-limbed structure of several words easily held together and moving along because the cadence goes with the speaker's breath." Yet Donoghue grouses altogether too much about Whitman's self-centeredness, anti-intellectuality, and lack of interest in history and form—which is rather like complaining that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is too tall to make a good jockey.

The remainder of the "Essays" section is a mixed bag. "Emily Dickinson" is a competent review of Richard Sewall's biography; "On 'Gerontion'" is an intelligent explication of Eliot's poem. In "Henry Adams's Novels," however, Donoghue takes sixteen pages to make the admittedly correct but extremely simple point that Adams was too much of an ideologue on the subject of identity and power to be a good novelist; and in "Henry James and *The Sense of the Past*" he spends eight pages describing the various possible attitudes toward the past that one might assume, and then eight more pages describing the attitude that James adopts in his last, unfinished novel. This is provocatively if somewhat ploddingly accomplished, and the essay offers several examples of the way that Donoghue can at once impress with his insight and irritate with his manner of expressing it. Consider the following two sentences, for instance: "I assume, then, that James regarded 'the historic' as what pretends to be knowable, given a little rummaging around the archives and nothing much in the exercise of imagination. His chief sentiment, faced by the pretension, was resentment at the implication that there is a form of reality that makes the imagination redundant." This is very good, but badly put.

As for "Stevens's Gibberish" (published here for the first time, apparently), it is an extremely peculiar piece. It takes its cue from a couple of provocative lines in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"—"The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to/The gibberish of the vulgate and back again"—but never settles upon anything resembling an intelligible thesis. At first Donoghue seems to be interested in demonstrating that "[i]n 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' the poet seeks a complete poetic speech by bringing together . . . 'the imagination's Latin' [and] 'the gibberish of the vulgate.'" But then he proceeds to twist the meaning of gibberish in all sorts of perverse and obscure ways, so that the essay eventually seems less a study of gibberish than an exercise in it. For instance, he speaks of a sort of gibberish "which corresponds not to words that fail but to words that drive meanings beyond their rational forms into a void or a vertigo," describes rhyme (for reasons that never become clear) as a form of gibberish, refers to "the gibberish of syntax," and wanders (critically speaking) into French airspace:

> If we transfer to the reader the faculty of gibberish hitherto ascribed to the poet, we offer him the latitude of reading which Roland Barthes proposed; not the duty of interpreting, moment by dutiful moment, the words on the page, but the pleasure that goes its own playful way. Barthes urged readers to act wilfully, running to excess in whatever directions they chose; anything, rather than accept the official rhetoric evidently enforced by a poem or novel. According to Barthes, there is no single privileged interpretation: the text is an occasion for being wilful.
>
> In this respect, Barthes's recommendation coincides with Derrida's . . . .

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It takes a while, after this detour, for Donoghue to get back (or, as he puts it, "revert") to Stevens, and when he does, the discussion of Derrida and Barthes appears not to have gotten us anywhere. But then Donoghue's principal purpose in this essay seems to be to work in as many high-powered names as possible; consequently he leads us through references not only to Barthes and Derrida, but also to Valéry, Rimbaud, R. P. Blackmur, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Hugh Kenner, Kenneth Burke, Alain Robbe-Grillet, C. S. Peirce, E. M. Cioran, Anthony Hecht, and Michel Foucault, *et al.,* without ever making it very clear what our destination might be. What is frustrating is not that Donoghue is trying here to communicate some complicated ideas about language in poetry, but that rather than set these ideas forth as lucidly and coherently as possible, he presents them in unclear prose that abounds in gratuitous digressions and baffling transitions. This essay is followed by "Trilling, Mind, and Society," a tiresomely elaborate examination of Lionel Trilling's attitudes toward the two subjects named in the title and his notion of their proper relation to one another.

The key word here, it should be noted, is *attitude.* For it might fairly be said that, in all of the essays in *Reading America,* Donoghue is concerned less with the literary value of these authors' productions than with their points of view; his is not a criticism of aesthetics, or even of ideas, but a criticism of attitudes—attitudes toward, say, life and literature, mind and matter, nature and man. Such attitudes are, of course, a legitimate field of critical inquiry, but Donoghue is so preoccupied with them, in the first section of *Reading America,* that these supposedly literary essays read like studies in philosophy. He discusses the poetry of Whitman and Stevens in much the same way as he discusses the theories of Emerson and Trilling; to Donoghue, the *way* in which Stevens, say, wrote—the style, the form, the voice—seems to matter less than the attitudinal content of his poems.

It is no coincidence that the author whose name appears most frequently in these pages is Kenneth Burke—a man whom it does not seem quite proper to describe as a literary critic, a man of whom Donoghue himself observes, in a reverent review that appears in the second section of *Reading America,* that "[i]t is still not clear what kind of writer Burke is: it doesn't seem adequate to call him a literary critic, a poet, a novelist, a short-story writer, a sociologist, or a philosopher of history." Donoghue's solution: "[p]erhaps we should simply call him a sage, and think of the latitude traditionally taken by such a mind." He proceeds to compare Burke—favorably—to Emerson ("No comparison nearer home suggests itself"), and to provide a useful summary of Burke's approach to literature—which, because it sheds light on the background of Donoghue's own method, seems worth rehearsing here.

Donoghue explains that during Burke's "second phase" (apparently his most important phase by far, at least to Donoghue), Burke proposed "to read literature 'as equipment for living' . . . . Poems, plays, and novels were approached as strategies for dealing with particular situations. One might find in a poem 'the dancing of an attitude.'" During this phase Burke worked out the theory of dramatism, which is based upon the notion that the most useful way to discuss human actions, whether in real life or in literature, is to do so in terms of five key words—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. "What Burke is offering," Donoghue writes, "is both a poetics of social life and a way of reading as an epitome of a way of living." What he is also offering, one might add, is a critical method that is impersonally clinical, that threatens to reduce literature to a blueprint of behavior, that slights the importance of style and ignores the obligation to make a critical judgment. It is a method whose influence is apparent on every page of Donoghue's essays, with their relative lack of attention to aesthetic questions and their virtual preoccupation with the concept of attitude—Emerson's and

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Thoreau's attitudes toward nature, Thoreau's and Stevens's attitudes toward language, Whitman's attitude toward self and history, Henry Adams's attitude toward identity and power, and Lionel Trilling's attitude toward mind and society.[2]

Burke's influence can also be observed in the frosty abstraction-ridden style of Donoghue's essays. Like Burke's, moreover, Donoghue's diction is often perplexing (Hart Crane, he writes, "had misgivings about the exemplary figure of his poetry"), inexact (he describes Dickinson's withdrawal from the world as "a gradual sequence"), or just plain awkward (Marianne Moore "didn't regard herself as a critic in any systematic sense: for her, Kenneth Burke was superbly enough in that category"). He complains that R. W. B. Lewis, in a discussion of Crane's poem "Chaplinesque," "does not encourage the reader to think of other poems that might measure that poem's achievement": what he means, I think, is that Lewis does not encourage the reader to measure the poem's achievement against that of other poems. This passage about the quotations in Marianne Moore's reviews is typically infelicitous in its phrasing:

> She never doubts that the quoted words have a valid adjectival relation to the personality from which they have issued; nor does she concern herself with values embodied in the linguistic medium rather than in a personality deemed to precede it. Many theorists would deny the merit of positing a personality separate from its linguistic form. But Moore resorted to words to assure herself of a personal force as if behind them.

Donoghue is, furthermore, partial to highfalutin but murky phrases such as "[h]istory as the narrative form of meaning." He often seems to prefer to say something confusingly and at length when he might say it clearly and concisely. In his essay on Henry Adams, he perpetrates several baffling and pretentious sentences the whole point of which (as becomes clear after two or three readings) is that Adams was interested in writing novels not as a means of understanding patterns and forces but as a means of conveying an understanding of them which he'd already come to. And Donoghue has a fondness for "explaining" quotations by paraphrasing them in more elaborate language and then bringing in a gratuitous quotation from some critic. For example:

> In *The Dolphin*, Elizabeth Hardwick is quoted as saying to Lowell, "Why don't you lose yourself/and write a play about the fall of Japan?" I take this as meaning: "Why don't you forget about yourself for a while, suppress yourself, and write something 'objective,' remote from your private interests and circumstances?" Or, in Char's terms, why don't you expel yourself, in all your incompleteness, from the scene, and expel all the other people whom you are in the habit of dragging into your poems as functions of yourself; and wait, trust in the Lord, until you will all be ready, combining in genuine presence?

Finally, Donoghue employs the words *revert* and *advert* to distraction and has an unfortunate affection for such precious vocables as *prescind* and *betimes*; also, over the course of the book he describes a number of things as exorbitant, and misuses the noun form of the word at least once, writing that Eliot wrestles with "the exorbitance of emotion to any object that supposedly provokes and justifies it."

Donoghue is not, then, one of the major prose stylists of our time. Yet he is a man of considerable critical talents—which are, as it turns out, manifested far more engagingly

2 It is perhaps worth noting that Donoghue's admiration of Burke is far from a one-sided affair. Burke has written about Donoghue—and very favorably, needless to say—more than once. In 1977, for example, Burke reviewed Donoghue's book *The Sovereign Ghost: Studies in Imagination* in *The New Republic*. The tenor of the review is expressed in its first sentence, which reads as follows: "Any text that deserves some measure of appreciation can consider itself lucky if Denis Donoghue chooses to write about it."

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in the second section of *Reading America* than in the first. This section consists of seventeen reviews—which originally appeared between 1967 and 1986, most of them in *The New York Times Book Review* or *The New York Review of Books*—of volumes by or about Conrad Aiken, Marianne Moore, Stevens, Ransom, Tate, H. D., Crane, Auden, Burke, Berryman, Lowell, Plath, and Ashbery. On the whole, these reviews are shorter, livelier, sharper, less abstract, and a good deal more witty and readable than the essays that precede them. Indeed, Donoghue's tone, in these pages, is often downright colloquial. He writes that Aiken's "narrative poems are interminable, as if Aiken wanted to get into some *Guinness Book of World Records* for the longest something-or-other in American poetry." In this section Donoghue is less blatantly concerned with the subject of attitude (though it does rear its head now and again; he carries on at length, for instance, about Lowell's "patience" and his attitude toward history). Nor does he lead us, in these reviews, on interminable detours through the thickets of theory. "Olson," he writes, "had a theory about space, that Space rather than Time is the American category. Enough of that." (Enough for a "brevity," perhaps, but not enough for a Donoghue essay; in section one of *Reading America* he devotes two paragraphs, no less, to Olson's eccentric theory of space.)

Patently, the review format obliges Donoghue to do something that he can avoid doing in scholarly essays: namely, to render critical opinions, and to do so succinctly. These opinions are often both cleverly phrased and wonderfully sensible. Of H. D., for instance, Donoghue says that her "theme was all she had, except for a small rare talent and a pale Greek face." Crane, he observes, "cultivated intensity at the expense of every other poetic value, as if he numbered only the hectic hours." Donoghue describes Plath's "Lady Lazarus" as a "big striptease, Lady doing her number and singing the blues"; and he remarks wisely of Plath's "Daddy"—with its Nazi death-camp imagery—that "the thrill we get from such poems is something we have no good cause to admire in ourselves."

He observes at one point that Auden "is gifted in comparison and contrast, for the energy they release." So is Donoghue. If, in section one, his tendency to overindulge this talent—a talent, by the way, that he shares not only with Auden but with Burke—is responsible for many an irrelevant digression, in section two this same talent, more strictly disciplined, yields a number of provocative connections. Donoghue speaks, for instance, of Aiken's "night on the town with Edwin Arlington Robinson, another sprawling poet, incidentally, given to long narrative poems but a far more powerful because more dramatic poet than Aiken." And though his preoccupation with attitude is unfortunate, he does make an interesting distinction between Lowell's attitude toward history and Pound's. Needless to say, Donoghue more often thinks to compare writers' attitudes than their stylistic or formal choices; in "Trilling, Mind, and Society," he writes that, in "Hawthorne and Our Time," Trilling "distinguished not so much between Hawthorne, James, and Kafka as between our diverse understanding of their tempers and achievement." This is much the sort of distinction that Donoghue tends to make, often—one must say—quite well.

Yet to read *Reading America* is to be woefully aware of Donoghue's relative indifference to the sort of distinctions—namely, aesthetic distinctions—that ultimately matter the most when one is speaking of a work of literature. To be sure, there are times—as I have indicated—when Donoghue does discuss aesthetic matters, and does so with a commendable discernment; but all too frequently, especially when one is reading the first section of the book, one feels the urge to remind him that a writer is not merely a bundle of attitudes, that a great novel or poem is something more than a document in behavioral psychology. All too frequently, in other words, Donoghue simply seems uninterested in the music of poetry, the rhythms of prose, all those ineffable aspects of literature that cannot be reduced, as it

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were, to one of the five categories of dramatism. To echo his own remark about Kenneth Burke, in short, it sometimes doesn't seem quite correct to describe Donoghue as a literary critic; in his more solemn, heavy-duty essays, he is really more of a textual diagnostician, a sort of NMR-spectrography technician in the laboratory of literature. If it is sad to have to say this sort of thing about a man of letters, it is particularly frustrating to have to say it about Denis Donoghue. For this man who at times doesn't look at all like a literary essayist has produced a small body of "brevities" which demonstrate that—all of his studied efforts to the contrary—he can be a very fine critic indeed.

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Seven hundred pretty good books

by Terry Teachout

The Good, the True, the Beautiful:
Those are the things that pay!
—Lewis Carroll

Most authors can contemplate the prospect of making a lot of money with breathtaking equanimity. George Santayana, for instance, had no difficulty in grasping the news that *The Last Puritan* had been picked as a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. "Of course it is gratifying to have this sudden boost," he wrote to a friend in 1935, "but someone must have it, apparently, every month, and really it's not extravagant to think that *The Last Puritan,* which is a major work and original in some respects, should have been chosen to be one of the twelve in one year."

But what was to Santayana cause for detached, perhaps even smug, self-congratulation provoked in John P. Marquand an oddly splenetic outburst. When his 1943 novel *So Little Time* was chosen as a Book of the Month, Marquand wrote to his son John, Jr.:

> This, as you may know, is one of the things which we boys in our profession strive for, and I am told that I am peculiarly honored since I am one of the few novelists who have had two novels selected by this august money-making organization, and nearly the only one who has had two in succession. Aside from this I am not deeply moved. I think the Book-of-the-Month Club is a racket that is spoiling the general sale of books by concentrating on the few that it sends to its customers. It is really another of these organizations which exploits our writers as do agents and the publishers themselves, as well as the damn movies.

The difference between Marquand's exasperation and Santayana's cool detachment was probably more a matter of self-confidence than anything else. Marquand, for years a highly paid contributor of slick short stories to *The Saturday Evening Post,* had been struggling since the publication of *The Late George Apley* to gain recognition as a serious novelist. ("I have never understood," he wrote, "why a sinner is not allowed at least to attempt reformation in the American World of Letters.") But he never quite pulled it off, and his efforts succeeded only in cementing the admiration of newspaper reviewers, the affection of millions of American readers, and the respect of the editorial board of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

For a frustrated highbrow like Marquand, the approval of the Book-of-the-Month Club was sheerest gall. The orthodox view of the BOMC as America's caretaker of middlebrow literary taste was neatly summed up three decades ago by Dwight Macdonald, who observed in his essay "Masscult & Midcult" that "Midcult is the Book-of-the-Month Club, which since 1926 has been supplying its members with reading matter of which the best that can be said is that it could be worse, i.e., they get John Hersey

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instead of Gene Stratton Porter." Nor was this elaborate disdain a mere affectation of Macdonald's. When Norman Podhoretz was an undergraduate whiz at Columbia in the late Forties, envious but socially tonier peers gleefully predicted that he would become another Clifton Fadiman when he grew up. Fadiman, who also started out as an undergraduate whiz at Columbia, ended up reviewing books for *The New Yorker,* starring on the popular radio show "Information, Please," and joining the BOMC panel of judges, the latter a job which he holds to this day. The insult was apparently considered definitive by its wielders. If the Book-of-the-Month Club had been around in 1922, George Follansbee Babbitt would surely have been a charter member.

Blackballed by the American World of Letters, Marquand finally succumbed to the blandishments of the Book-of-the-Month Club—in spades. Not only did he accept without further protest the fifty thousand dollars which the selection of *So Little Time* added to his 1943 royalty statement, he also accepted an invitation to become one of the club's judges, the ultimate Midcult literary sinecure. Marquand kept the job, which paid him twenty thousand a year, for the rest of his life, and whatever pleasures it afforded him, he knew that it had defined him more firmly than ever.

Were the highbrows right about the Book-of-the-Month Club? More than seven hundred books have been chosen as Main Selections in the six decades during which the club has been doing business, and it is, after all, worth remembering that *The Last Puritan* did indeed make the cut. So did *Nineteen Eighty-Four, Doctor Faustus, A Preface to Morals, The Catcher in the Rye, The Gulag Archipelago, In Cold Blood,* and *Seven Gothic Tales,* none of them quite the thing for perusing on hot summer nights in Zenith, Ohio.

The quality of these titles alone suggests that there might just be more to the Book-of-the-Month Club than meets the highbrow eye. Such is the case made by Al Silverman, chairman of the BOMC and editor of *The Book of the Month: Sixty Years of Books in American Life,* a celebratory miscellany of articles originally published in *The Book-of-the-Month Club News,* a monthly magazine which describes the club's current selections, alternates, and dividends.[1] Mr. Silverman's ostensible purpose is to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Book-of-the-Month Club. But one quickly realizes that this miscellany has a message. Mr. Silverman, it seems, earnestly wishes to convince the reader that the BOMC, far from being a mere middlebrow business venture, has in fact been an institution central to the American literary life.

That Mr. Silverman takes the Book-of-the-Month Club seriously is evident in his choice of epigraph for *The Book of the Month,* a generous slice of Milton's "Areopagitica." That he means to place the BOMC in the mainstream of American literature is equally evident in his opening paragraph: "Harry Scherman picked a good time to start a book club. It was 1926 and Hemingway was posing for a photograph with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound at Sylvia Beach's bookstore in Paris." But the full scope of his intentions is revealed when he explains that the purpose of *The Book of the Month* is to "tell a story of the social history of the past six decades as seen through books," adding that "I wanted to know more about the club's past because that way I would know a little more about *our* past as a country." (Shades of Charlie Wilson and General Motors.)

Cynics will doubtless respond that the real purpose of *The Book of the Month* is to provide advertising for what John Marquand, who knew the value of a dollar, succinctly described as a "money-making organization." But Mr. Silverman, it turns out, is at least partly right. Not that *The Book of the Month* has any particular literary value. Though a great many distinguished authors who have contributed to the pages of *The*

1 *The Book of the Month: Sixty Years of Books in American Life,* edited by Al Silverman; Little, Brown, 335 pages, $17.95.

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Book-of-the-Month Club News turn up in the pages of this volume, their contributions tend to run to what Joseph Epstein calls "blurbissimo." The best piece of writing in *The Book of the Month,* ironically, is a droll letter which highbrow radio comedian Fred Allen sent to the BOMC in response to a request for a review of a novel by an old Allen jokewriter named Herman Wouk.

Still, *The Book of the Month* does contain the raw material for an exercise in social history which, if not quite as broad as that promised by Mr. Silverman, is nonetheless intriguing. This is the story of the club itself, a tale which George Santayana, chronicler of America's genteel tradition and author of two Main Selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club, would have appreciated to the fullest. And though Mr. Silverman devotes too much space to corporate puffery and not nearly enough to hard facts, his book gives the reader a clear sense of the important role the club has played in what William Shirer, a favorite author of BOMC members, might have described as the rise and fall of American literature since World War I.

The idea of a mail-order book club had apparently been floating around for a good many years before Harry Scherman got the notion to start one in 1926. Subscription libraries in the United States go back to the days of Benjamin Franklin. The German *Volksverband der Bücherfreunde* (People's Union of Book Lovers) published and distributed books at a discount as a response to the postwar hyperinflation. But the Book-of-the-Month Club sprang up as a result of an entirely different problem: the poor distribution of books outside America's major cities. In 1930 there was one bookstore for every thirty thousand Americans. Thirty-two percent of Americans had no direct access to any bookstores whatsoever. Shorter working hours, higher literacy rates, and rural electrification had combined to increase the number of potential readers of books and magazines. A huge, untapped market was waiting for the right kind of businessman to come along.[2]

The Twenties may have been the decade of Hemingway, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, but they were also the age of what Al Silverman adroitly describes as "entrepreneurs of the word." The *Reader's Digest* was founded in 1922, *Time* in 1923, *The New Yorker* in 1925. These business ventures, like the men who founded them, were as characteristic of the Twenties as bathtub gin. DeWitt Wallace, Henry Luce, and Harold Ross were all classic specimens of the Great American Culture Salesman, half genius and half rube, a type which seemingly came in with Coolidge and went out with Pearl Harbor. Wallace was once described by a colleague as having a "strictly average" mind which "completely reflects the mentality of his readers." Though he boasted of his "passable" Latin and Greek, Harry Scherman was clearly cut from the same bolt. His business philosophy was straight out of the pages of Dale Carnegie or Elbert Hubbard—or, for that matter, the *Reader's Digest* itself.

> If you are to deal with or think about the American people en masse, you can trust them as you trust yourself. You can trust their consuming curiosity about all the quirks and subtleties of human existence; you can trust their fascination with every colorful aspect of history; you can trust their immediate response to good humor and gaiety, but also to the most serious thought; you can trust their gracious open-mindedness, forever seeking new light upon their troubled but wonderful world.

A man who can say such things without cracking a smile is destined to become a millionaire, and Harry Scherman did not disappoint. Recognizing that there was a fortune to be made in mail-order books, he devised an ingenious subscription system in which club members were required to pur-

2 This account of the history of the Book-of-the-Month Club draws in large part on Charles Lee's *The Hidden Public: The Story of the Book-of-the-Month Club,* published in 1958 by Doubleday. Club officials declined to talk with me or supply any information about the BOMC and its operations.

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chase a fixed number of titles a year and were automatically sent a Main Selection each month. Scherman then added a stiff jolt of very special old snake oil. He decided that the Main Selection would be chosen by an all-star editorial board which met regularly to have lunch and select the "Book of the Month": Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Christopher Morley, Heywood Broun, and William Allen White.

The result, a typically American combination of steak and sizzle, caught on with amazing speed. Starting out with 4,750 members, the Book-of-the-Month Club expanded to 46,539 within eight months. By 1929, 110,588 people were members of the club, which was well on its way to becoming a fixed star of American popular culture. People told jokes about the Book-of-the-Month Club. Novelists satirized it. Other entrepreneurs imitated it, using Scherman's basic subscription principle to sell everything from fruit to phonograph records. There was even a highbrow equivalent of the BOMC, the Reader's Subscription, whose editorial board consisted of Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, and W. H. Auden.

The club's initial selling point was convenience. (The BOMC's first advertising slogan was "Handed to You by the Postman, the New Books You Intend to Read.") But the all-star board made the Book-of-the-Month Club a household word. The purpose of the board, Scherman later said, was "to set up some kind of authority so that the subscribers would feel that there was some reason for buying a group of books. We had to establish indispensable confidence with publishers and readers." By giving his editorial board absolute freedom to pick the Main Selection each month, Scherman gave to the Book-of-the-Month Club a patina of independence and literary respectability; by choosing as panelists five conservatively minded writers who were already in the business of attracting large audiences, he ensured that the Main Selections would never be so *recherché* as to scare off an excessive number of subscribers.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher anchored the first BOMC panel to the literary center as rigidly as Scherman could possibly have wished. Though her own novels are forgotten today, her aesthetic standards are suggested by a 1946 exchange of letters reprinted in *The Book of the Month.* To an unhappy BOMC member complaining that the current Main Selection depicted "a group of people whose entire conversation is made up of talk of sleeping with each other, and such dirty stuff," Miss Canfield stalwartly replied:

> Three of the five members of the Editorial Board . . . are of Quaker background. That is, I think you will agree, a guarantee of our sober, careful upbringing in our youth, and of our recognition of moral values during our adult life . . . . I am repelled as you are by what seems to me the overemphasis laid in modern novels on sex-relations. But I feel that if there is in our American twentieth-century life as it is lived by large numbers of people, in actual reality, such an overemphasis, with its resultant misery and dreariness, it would be ostrich-like for our serious novel writers to ignore it.

What squalid fancy of the editorial board, one wonders, could Miss Canfield possibly have been defending? *The Company She Keeps*? *Memoirs of Hecate County*? *Other Voices, Other Rooms*? None of the above. It was a best-selling novel about the advertising business called *The Hucksters.* One wonders what poor Miss Canfield, who died in 1958, would have made of the sex relations overemphasized in such later Main Selections as *The World According to Garp.*

Even more central to the success of that first panel were Henry Seidel Canby and Christopher Morley, the best-known literary popularizers of their day. Both men achieved a modest immortality by being on the receiving ends of two of the wickedest parodies imaginable, Morley a brutal 1938 Edmund Wilson spoof called "The Pleasures of Literature" ("With how sure an expectation of solace, amid the turmoil and perplexities of our time, do I turn, when the fires of evening are lit, to my silent companions of

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the library!") and Canby an even more savage character sketch in Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution*:

> He was a prominent literary critic: he had a column of criticism, every week except the last two weeks in August, in the best-known literary weekly; he was a director of a club that picked books for readers who didn't know what to read . . . during the school year he would lecture to colleges, and when the school year was over he would make commencement addresses to them or get honorary degrees from them; he was the chief reader of a publishing house, he was one of the vice-presidents of the American branch of the Academie Francaise; you saw one-act plays by him, if you fell among anthologies of one-act plays; he even wrote informal essays.

Scherman's first panel, as Richard Rovere noted in *The American Mercury,* "carried the stamp of culture without being too frighteningly highbrow." The Main Selections they picked out from the thousands of titles submitted to the BOMC each year attracted herds of loyal, trusting subscribers. (Up to fifty percent of the club's members were taking the Main Selection as late as 1948.) And as the original board members died or retired, Scherman continued to display an impeccable sense of middlebrow literary taste in choosing their replacements.

John P. Marquand, who came aboard in 1944 and remained until his death in 1960, was in many ways the quintessential board member of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The country's most consistently popular author throughout the Forties and Fifties, Marquand was unfailingly sensitive to the need to offer the widest possible variety of books to the club's members. Reporting to his fellow board members in 1947 on a novel by Thomas Costain, Marquand noted: "It seems to me about time that we gave the customers something with entertainment value, and never mind the art and implications." After reading *Intruder in the Dust,* he told board member Amy Loveman that the book "really would be easier to read if [Faulkner] adopted a few printer's conventions, but perhaps its being hard to read makes it great literature."

Despite a penchant for highbrow-baiting, Marquand was just as capable of pushing a book like Peter DeVries's *The Tents of Wickedness* or Francis Steegmuller's translation of *Madame Bovary,* and his recommendations were generally as solid and reliable as was his own writing. Judges like Marquand and Clifton Fadiman, for all their literary sophistication and intelligence, were sufficiently aloof from the more upsetting crosscurrents of modernism to ensure that each month's Main Selection would be respectable enough to keep the business side of the BOMC humming.

No complete listing of the club's seven hundred-odd Main Selections is currently available to the general public, making it difficult to analyze changes in the quality and character of the club's offerings over the years. But *The Book of the Month* provides an informative, if unsystematic, overview of the club's offerings throughout its sixty-year history, and one of the most striking things about Mr. Silverman's running commentary is the candor with which he confesses the failings of the selection process.

Leafing at random through *The Book of the Month,* one runs across sentence after sentence like these: "For some unfathomable reason, *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren was not picked as a Selection of the Club." "No Faulkner novel became a book of the month until his last book, a minor work called *The Reivers,* perhaps because one judge confessed that he always giggled when reading Faulkner." "Thus *The Sun Also Rises* did not become *the* Book of the Month." "No F. Scott Fitzgerald work ever became a Book of the Month." "It is somewhat disconcerting to note that Saul Bellow's first BOMC Selection came late in 1975." "But it wasn't until 1979, with *The Ghost Writer,* that a Roth book became a Club Selection."

What caused these embarrassing oversights? One suspects that a good deal of blame can be laid on the board's use of the

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principle of concurrence in choosing Main Selections. "The old Quakers in their business meetings," Canby explained, "never voted. If the majority could not persuade the minority to concur, the proposal was dropped." Conventional balloting having failed to work in the BOMC's early years, Canby persuaded the board to use concurrence instead. As a result, a lot of books were dropped over the years because they failed to accord with the sensibilities of one or the other of the five judges. John Marquand claimed that *Intruder in the Dust* was passed over as a Main Selection because it made one of the judges "nervous." And when Amy Loveman agreed to concur in the selection of Robert Ruark's *Something of Value,* she insisted on being allowed to publish the following starchy dissent in *The Book-of-the-Month Club News*:

> This is an absorbing book, but many readers will find it a shocking one, as I did, and that is the reason I did not approve of its selection. It is not shocking in the ordinary sense of the word, for it contains no obscenity and no deliberate attempt at sensationalism, but shocking by sheer weight of its facts.

Even when the board managed to pick a book of undeniable seriousness, strange things sometimes happened in the course of the selection process. Books were read and considered six months or more prior to publication, and it was not uncommon for the board to suggest revisions to the author. For the most part these suggestions were made to novice authors. But the editorial board actually dared to suggest to George Orwell that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would benefit from two cuts, the appendix on Newspeak and the thirty-page "Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism." Orwell declined ("I really cannot allow my work to be mucked about beyond a certain point," he told his American publisher) and the board, to its credit, backed down.

George Orwell scored twice, the first time with *Animal Farm.* James Michener, on the other hand, has racked up ten Main Selections since 1947, making him the all-time fiction champ of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Five to one sounds about right. "Because no permanent contribution to world literature has been published in the month of May," Canby asked rhetorically, "is a critic therefore stopped from recommending somebody's good and readable novel?" This question could have easily served as the credo of the BOMC editorial board. Some of the board's selections were first-rate, some frankly trashy, most comfortably middle-of-the-road. Charles Lee cites the following "distinguished selections" in his introduction to *The Hidden Public: The Story of the Book-of-the-Month Club,* written with the full cooperation of the club, and his list would seem to be as representative of its period as any: *All Quiet on the Western Front, Gone with the Wind, The Good Earth, John Brown's Body, Life with Father, Kristin Lavransdatter, Revolt in the Desert, The Rise of American Civilization, Elmer Gantry, The Last Puritan, Darkness at Noon, Animal Farm, Anthony Adverse, Benjamin Franklin, The Nazarene, The Gathering Storm, The Old Man and the Sea, Andersonville,* and *By Love Possessed.*

Confronted with so bewildering a hodgepodge of titles, the reader is likely to grope for *some* sort of meaningful ordering principle. Such groping is in vain. Canby claimed that his sole purpose in selecting books was "the passing on of sound values to others." Fadiman speaks of "my own direct, uncomplicated, eager interest in a book." The judges explained in the very first issue of *The Book-of-the-Month Club News* that their object had been "not to deliver an ultimatum as to the 'best' book each month, but to find a book that will appeal most winningly and forcibly to widely differing tastes." William Allen White broke down those tastes in 1940 as follows: twenty percent "who will accept subtlety in literature, who like stylists, who do not mind 'dirt,' who quickly fall in with new literary fashions"; twenty percent "who have made good but have not had much education, who like the looks of the books on their living-room tables, who intend to read but never get around to it"; and sixty

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percent "solid professional people—doctors, school principals, and so on." If there is a better definition of middlebrow taste, I haven't heard it.

Highbrow opinions of the Book-of-the-Month Club, not surprisingly, have varied wildly. When Charles Lee sent Malcolm Cowley a list of the club's Main Selections from 1926 to 1953 and invited comment, Cowley pointed out that Faulkner, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Gide, Pirandello, Rilke, Lorca, D. H. Lawrence, Dos Passos, Yeats, Eliot, Mauriac, Conrad Aiken, Valéry, Claudel, and Colette were among the important authors of the day who were missing. (Proust and Colette eventually made it as alternates.) Still, Cowley's overall opinion of the club was one of "very qualified praise."

Dwight Macdonald, on the other hand, was convinced that middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club had a dangerous and destructive effect on American culture:

> Up to about 1750, art and thought were pretty much the exclusive province of an educated minority. Now that the masses—that is, everybody—are getting into the act and making the scene, the problem of vulgarization has become acute. I see only two logical solutions: (a) an attempt to integrate the masses into high culture; or (b) a contrary attempt to define two cultures, one for the masses and the other for the classes. I am for the latter.

Macdonald saw the Book-of-the-Month Club, like the novels of John Marquand or the plays of Thornton Wilder, as a flagrant example of Midcult, a consciously commercial attempt to bridge the gap between Masscult and High Culture. He was convinced that Midcult undermines and vulgarizes the values of High Culture and makes it easier for the barbaric minions of Masscult to storm the gates. ("But that roller-skating horse comes along, and the final impression is that both Renoir and the horse were talented.") And he argued forcefully that Midcult values, "instead of being transitional—'the price of progress'—may now themselves become a debased, permanent standard."

As an indictment of mass culture as a whole, this argument carries a good deal of weight. As an indictment of the Book-of-the-Month Club in particular, it doesn't wash. Al Silverman himself makes the case for Midcult in *The Book of the Month,* although not very well:

> In his challenging essay "Masscult and Midcult," Dwight Macdonald criticized the Book-of-the Month Club for what he felt was its tendency to water down and vulgarize high culture . . . . Harry Scherman was a pragmatist, and a populist, when it came to reading. He understood that there would always be that gulf between Macdonald's High Culture and popular culture, but he also felt that the two sometimes merged and, anyway, that a bridge existed between the two and that people could walk back and forth as they chose.

A more convincing argument, however, is implicit in this earnest but naïve rebuttal of "Masscult & Midcult." Harry Scherman, like DeWitt Wallace and Henry Luce, proposed to make a lot of money by improving people's minds, and he took both sides of the equation seriously. The purpose of the Book-of-the-Month Club, as Scherman saw it, was to bring an unprecedentedly wide selection of books into as many homes as possible. "In the late nineties or early nineteen hundreds," he wrote in 1928,

> conditions were probably at their worst. That was the day of the real best seller, when half a dozen books sold up to half a million copies each, when the general reading population *all* read the same five or six books—and very few others—when 2,000 copies was a good sale for a serious nonfiction book, and 300,000 moderate distribution for a popular milk-and-water novel. That is standardization—and we had it.

To judge by those goals, Scherman succeeded brilliantly, selling books to the masses that almost certainly would not have

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reached them otherwise. Many of those books were good. And a good book, as Carl Van Doren once said, "is not made less good or less useful by being put promptly into the hands of many readers." One suspects that even George Santayana would have agreed. Surely the forty thousand copies of *The Last Puritan* sold to the members of the Book-of-the-Month Club more than adequately define the club's very real place in the American literary life.

What has the passing of time done to Harry Scherman's radiant vision of a more literate America? Up until a few years ago, it still made perfect sense. I should know, for I was once a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and my memories of it are wholly benign. I joined the club as a small-town high-school senior in Missouri for the very good reason that there wasn't a decent bookstore much closer than a day's drive from my home town. During the two years I belonged, I purchased at least three Main Selections that have remained on my bookshelves to this day: William Manchester's *American Caesar,* Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff,* and Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers.* I bought my fair share of alternates and dividends, too, among them a very nice set of Evelyn Waugh's early novels and a Nabokov package that contained *Lolita, Speak, Memory,* and *Pale Fire.* It's hard to get much more highbrow than that.

But times have changed back where I come from. Now there are a couple of surprisingly good bookstores thirty miles from my old front door. The spread of chain bookstores throughout the small towns and rural areas that once provided the BOMC with its staunchest customers has revolutionized the publishing business. It has also deprived the Book-of-the-Month Club of one of its chief reasons for existing. Fred Smith, then BOMC publicity director, noted in 1948 that "We do more than half of our business in cities where the publishers do less than 20% of theirs. Where publishers do 90% of their business, we do something over 40% . . . . This would indicate that our business is directly related to book distribution, that the vast majority of our members are people who have no readily available retail source of books." Those words have an ominous ring today.

Moreover, the drawing power of the Book-of-the-Month Club editorial board has been on the wane for years. John Marquand was probably the last panelist widely known to the general reading public. Today's editorial board consists of veterans Clifton Fadiman and John K. Hutchens; novelists Mordecai Richler and Wilfrid Sheed; and David McCullough and Gloria Norris, both of whom started out as members of the BOMC staff before being promoted to the board. Good judges all, no doubt, but one has to wonder exactly what they add to the appeal of the club out in the boondocks. Not that the Book-of-the-Month Club is to blame. Literary celebrity just isn't what it used to be. What public figure of today, literary or otherwise, could possibly wield an authority equivalent to that once exercised by the likes of Canby or Marquand? John Updike? William F. Buckley, Jr.? James Clavell? Bill Cosby? Phil Donahue? A grim little party game suggests itself.

In any event, the literary scene today shows no sign of having been influenced for the better by Harry Scherman's democratic plans for the bookbuying future. "We thought that we might be able to create a new kind of audience for good reading," Henry Seidel Canby said in 1947, "and we did." Maybe so. But though more people are indeed buying more books, the books they are buying are for the most part trashier than ever. Publishing has become an impossibly big business, and the margin for error at the major houses has become so narrow as to squeeze out almost anything that can't be sold by the truckload.

The current issue of *People,* which is lying on my desk as I write this paragraph, contains an article about a woman named Sally Beauman whose first novel, *Destiny,* was recently signed by Bantam Books for a record-breaking one-million-dollar advance. Stephen Rubin, Bantam's editorial director,

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describes Miss Beauman as follows: "This is a woman who not only understands the elements of a blockbuster, but she can write as well. There is elegance in *Destiny,* along with intelligence, energy, and sex." One week before the official publication date, *Destiny* appeared at the number six spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

When I read this cautionary tale, I immediately thought of an indelible remark Diana Trilling made in her review of John P. Marquand's 1946 novel *B. F.'s Daughter*:

> Without transcending the high-grade commodity level, he has done a great deal to raise our standards of what a literary commodity can be. Without urging us to regard his novels as "important," he has done more than any writer of our time to close the dangerous gap between important and popular fiction.

Well, Mrs. Trilling, that gap is yawning again. There are no more John P. Marquands, and if there were their books probably wouldn't sell. Their closest equivalents are such pandering sexual politicians as John Irving and E. L. Doctorow. The comparison between Marquand's popular but artistically serious novels and the fifth-rate throwaway tracts of his successors illustrates with grisly accuracy the deterioration that has taken place in American literature over the last couple of decades.

But there is still a Book-of-the-Month Club, fumbling along in its well-meaning, idealistic way, bringing pretty good books to the prairies year after year. To be sure, the pickings are slimmer these days. Where once the BOMC could offer its readers *The Heart of the Matter* and *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Last Hurrah,* they now get . . . *And Ladies of the Club* and *The Accidental Tourist* and *The Cider House Rules.* And publishers are increasingly less willing to cut deals with the BOMC when they can dump millions of copies of a piece of garbage like *Destiny* directly into the chain bookstores without wasting time and money on middlemen.

Still, one shouldn't blame the BOMC for the declining quality of the books it has to sell. No doubt the judges are patiently making do with the likes of John Irving in the secret hope that another John Marquand will finally come along. "Optimists as always," Al Silverman writes in *The Book of the Month,* "all of us who work for the Club today are looking for more for tomorrow. We are joined together to find, among the 5,000 submissions we get from publishers every year, the book that will bring us wonder and joy or help us understand this fragmented age." The current hoopla at the BOMC involves the board's decision to offer an art book as the Main Selection for the first time ever. The book in question is *Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures,* and the BOMC has ordered up a special edition. It's comforting to note that whatever the long-term prospects of the Book-of-the-Month Club, America's literate middlebrows continue to be suckers for the right kind of pitch.[3]

Me, I'm not a member any more. There are enough good bookstores in New York to suit my tastes. But I wish the Book-of-the-Month Club well. Its old-fashioned goals remain every bit as brave and foolish as Dwight Macdonald's chilly vision of a society where "the masses have their Masscult" while "the few who care about good writing, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, etc., have their High Culture." Not to mention a good deal more humane. If Clifton Fadiman and company ever find themselves in need of a new board member, they can write to me in care of this magazine. I know a good lost cause when I see one.

---

3 The club's Main Selections since January, 1986, include such titles as Geraldine Ferraro's memoirs, David Halberstam's *The Reckoning,* Larry McMurtry's *Texasville,* and no less than two novels by Stephen King. It may be worth mentioning that the only one of the club's last twenty-two selections which I have read for other than professional reasons is Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome.*

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Poems *by Timothy Steele, Prescott Evarts, Jr., Dick Allen, Rachel Hadas, & G. S. Sharat Chandra*

Aurora

Your sleep is so profound
This room seems a recess
Awaiting consciousness.
Gauze curtains, drawn around
The postered bed, confute
Each waking attribute—
Volition, movement, sound.

Outside, though, chilly light
Shivers a puddle's coil
Of iridescent oil;
Windows, sun-struck, ignite;
Doves strut along the edge
Of roof- and terrace-ledge
And drop off into flight.

And soon enough you'll rise.
Long-gowned and self-aware,
Brushing life through your hair,
You'll notice with surprise
The way your glass displays,
Twin-miniatured, your face
In your reflective eyes.

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Goddess, it's you in whom
Our clear hearts joy and chafe.
Awaken, then. Vouchsafe
Ideas to resume.
Draw back the drapes: let this
Quick muffled emphasis
Flood light across the room.

—*Timothy Steele*

Youth

A dead oak's branches hold a nest
(Abandoned now) that ospreys built.
He wades the river; slow clouds spread
At each step from the bottom's silt.
Or, his shirt bunched beneath his head,
He drowses, as the breeze falls slack,
And feels the grass he lies on pressed
In complex patterns on his back.

Though summer seems to pause with its
Hypnotic sluggishness and drouth,
Downstream a railway bridge extends
Across the estuary's mouth;
And, while the sliding water blends
Mercurial, flashing, glob-like fires,
Above the bridge a lineman sits
High in his seat-sling, working wires.

—*Timothy Steele*

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Dependent nature

The worker hovers where the jade plant blooms,
Then settles on a blossom to her taste;
Her furred and black-and-yellow form assumes
A clinging curve by bending from the waist.

So, too, the sweetpeas, climbing on their net,
Cast wire-wrapping tendrils as they flower,
Nor need they shield themselves from a regret
Of the dependent nature of their power.

They're spared the shrewd self-mockery of the sage
Attuned to limits and disparity.
They're spared the sad mirth serving those who gauge

The gap between the longed-for and the real,
Who grasp provisional joy, who must not be
Desolate, however desolate they feel.

—Timothy Steele

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Pacific rim

Unsteadily, I stand against the wash
Flooding in, climbing thigh, waist, rib-cage. Turning,
It sweeps me, breaststroking, out on its swift
Sudsy withdrawal. Greenly a wave looms;
I duck beneath its thundering collapse,
Emerging on the far side, swimming hard
For the more manageable, deeper waters.
How the sea elevates! Pausing to tread it
And feather-kicking its profundity,
The swimmer wears each swell around his neck,
And rides the slopes that heave through him,
The running valleys that he sinks across,
Part of the comprehensive element
Washing as well now the Galápagos,
The bay at Wenchow, the Great Barrier Reef.

Why, then, this ache, this sadness? Towelled off,
The flesh is mortified, the small hairs standing
Among their goosebumps, the teeth chattering
Within the skull. A brutal century
Draws to a close. Bewildering genetrix,
As your miraculous experiment
In consciousness hangs in the balance, do
You pity those enacting it? The headlands'
Blunt contours sloping to the oceanside,
Do angels weep for our folly? Merciful,
Do you accompany our mortality,
Just as, low to the water, the pelican
Swiftly pursues his shadow down a swell?

—*Timothy Steele*

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House lust

There is much to be done
in this old house.
I wake in the dark dreaming
the poetry of repair—
fixing every room
and slipping egglike soaps
into porcelain dishes.

But I wake at the same time
every night and wait
fruitlessly for the gray
along the curtains to glow,
but it is ghost time
when the obscene calls
of the night come in.

Along the dawn wall
the oil-based white
reflects a light blue.
The ladder is cool to the nose.
By noon I have to back down,
dazzled by the wedding white,
dehydrated by lust.

—*Prescott Evarts, Jr.*

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The familiar

We are all too ready to live with it: the nondescript
House on the barren road, trees of no distinction,
The colorless lake beneath the colorless sky,
So long as it seems to work. It has the
Force of inertia, the pleasures of talk
About weather. In its familiar grip
We can lie about ourselves and not be hurt,
Watch clouds hold level in a crystal ball.
But when it doesn't work, when dust
Blows along the road, the lake kicks up, the trees
Flail like the devil's paintbrush,
We hate it—whispering to each other
How dull we've become, how hideous
Your face, my face, our lutulent desire
To be and see and feel and know and touch
Never too much, lest we want more
Than stabs of love and momentary wounds
Healing so soon we soon forget they were.
We were
Once strangers with our whole lives fit to tell.

—*Dick Allen*

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Idolatry brood

To gaze at the enormous
yellow moon of summer,
to focus on a stone,
on lives that wax and wane,
on leaves that come undone
in drought or shine with rain,
the child's fresh face, a magnet to the eye—
is this idolatry?

Between the glistening pelts of bathing children
and the knuckle-gnawing refusal
to look up from one's book,
find out some middle way.
Fences. A weathered barn.
Are you getting warmer?
The milky grey expanse of sky implodes
on one more apparition:

no silo shimmering through celestial mist,
only more love for this
world's pillars, banisters,
exit signs, arches, thresholds, winding stairs
struggled up, steep conundrum, toward a truth
hidden even as we breathe the thinner
air and feel the sun's last kiss
blow hot on our closed faces.

—Rachel Hadas

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Luchresi, not Edgar Poe

In the Cask of Amantillado, Luchresi
is the pedestrian wine expert

I'm Luchresi, risen from the grave,
I've come to compare wines
not to praise the raven on the goblets
all in a row, ruby stemmed,
swaying to the color of my thirst.

My lips sway with the quick of wings,
but the raven has a beak
which swoops down on things:
I'm Luchresi, not Edgar Poe,
dancing mellow in the valley of breasts.

In far away hills whose amber I've touched,
women waltz in ecstatic shapes,
the raven sits eye to eye,
I'm Luchresi in the dark of cellars,
nomad in a mist of grapes.

The raven taps on my windowpane,
I wake up:
is this beaujolais or champagne?
The raven follows me from age to age,
I'm Luchresi, not Edgar Poe,
I fest in a nest of bottled names.

—*G.S. Sharat Chandra*

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Music

The violinist of the age

by Samuel Lipman

The violin is a curious instrument. When ill played, it is supremely ugly; when mastered, more than any other string instrument it approaches the human voice in its ability to communicate what I am afraid can only be called (even in this advanced and putatively rational age) soul-states. It is for this reason, I suppose, that the violin has so often been seen as a favorite instrument of the devil. This association has entered literature and art (to name only two examples, the first now little known and the second relatively recent) in the German poet Lenau's drama *Faust* (1836-46) and in Stravinsky's music-cum-dance-cum-narration *L'Histoire du soldat* (1918). In the rather more public world of performance, the suggestion of satanic inspiration formed the largest part of the legends surrounding the Italian violinist and composer Niccolo Paganini (1782-1840).

As far as performers are concerned, in our own century the violin (in the proper hands) has seemed a benevolent voice, a speaker on behalf of the deepest yearnings of the individual, and, in the case of Jewish violinists, a representative of a whole people. It is in this light that most of the greatest violin careers of our time are to be seen. Unlike such intellectually sophisticated artists as Josef Szigeti (1892-1973) and Adolf Busch (1891-1952), such famous artists as Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), Efrem Zimbalist (1890-1985), Mischa Elman (1891-1967), Jascha Heifetz (b. 1901), and David Oistrakh (1908-1974), for all their natural musicality and grace, were content to play brilliantly and "with feeling"; they did not readily attempt to articulate musical structure and content.

Often vulgar and sometimes coarse (even the supposedly "aristocratic" Heifetz was not above a winking indulgence in questionable taste), these immensely gifted violinists of the heart aimed at, and found, a mass audience that reacted to their every throb. Their successor today, at least in terms of fame and box-office appeal, is, of course, Itzhak Perlman; but whereas his predecessors were at one with their art even in their excesses, Perlman, for all his violinistic flair and his daunting success, strikes many (including this writer) as both imitative and cynically distanced from the tradition and the emotions he so facilely exploits.

Until now, this demotic approach to violin playing seemed to be best expressed by the names listed above, along with their many well known, albeit lesser, colleagues. Now, however, this landscape has been permanently changed by the re-discovery of the complete recordings of the Polish violinist Josef Hassid. Made for the great English record company HMV in 1939 and 1940, these nine 78 RPM record sides (less than thirty-four minutes of music in all) can tell us only briefly of a performing career that was tragically cut short by mental illness in 1940, when the artist was only sixteen. Hassid died in 1945 following brain surgery to correct a condition that the available information does little to specify.

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Indeed, what I have called the available information on Hassid seems pretty much confined to the record jacket of this invaluable disc.[1] He is listed in none of the standard reference works, including the late Boris Schwarz's 1983 *Great Masters of the Violin,* the fifth and sixth editions of *Grove's Dictionary,* and the fifth, sixth, and seventh editions of the standard *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians.* His entry in the standard violin discography, James Creighton's 1974 *Discopaedia of the Violin,* gives his dates as 1924-46 rather than 1923-45, as given on the HMV record jacket, and contains no further information on his life and career. Exceptions to this rule of oblivion are brief mentions in the supplement to the memoirs of Hassid's teacher, the great Hungarian violinist and teacher Carl Flesch (1873-1944), written by Flesch's son, and in Dominic Gill's recent and sumptuous *The Book of the Violin.*[2]

The repertory played by Hassid on this record is hardly promising. It is in fact little more than a brief tour through the frayed and tattered world of violin encores. Here are short pieces by Elgar, Tchaikowsky, Massenet (the famous "Méditation" from *Thaïs*), Dvořák, Sarasate, Achron, and Kreisler (the famous *Caprice viennois*). We hear the Elgar work—*La Capricieuse*—in two versions, the earlier made as a test in September of 1939, the later made around a year after, and issued, as were all the discs Hassid made save the initial test, in the prestigious HMV Red Label series. In all the issued records, Hassid's pianist was the redoubtable accompanist Gerald Moore; in the test record, his pianist was the then well-known Ivor Newton.

Encore pieces, of course, have long been a staple of violinists, and have been a staple of the phonograph since its earliest and most primitive days. The greatest violinists of the pre-electrical recording era before 1925 are known to us essentially only in the crowd-pleasers which their faithful audiences most wanted to hear—and which had the advantage of being short enough to fit comfortably on a 78 RPM record side. Our knowledge of the playing of Zimbalist in his prime is almost completely confined to this repertory; a new re-issue of all the Victor pre-electric records made by Fritz Kreisler, running to ten LP sides,[3] makes clear how an entire phonographic reputation could be sustained entirely by the recording of just such trifles.[4]

But what are trifles for Kreisler and for his marvelous colleagues are quite otherwise for Hassid. Perhaps the highest honor that can be paid to these recordings made by a sixteen-year-old Polish boy is that when one listens to him play, one does not think in terms of trifles, but rather of a pure manifestation of music. Here, as Hassid indulges in superhuman flights of lightness, grace, and ease, one senses immediately that his playing is beyond style, beyond taste, beyond technique. Put another way, so fully formed and perfect is Hassid's style, taste, and technique that he directs our attention away from the earthly world of performance toward some metaphysical realm of tone.

Perhaps no critic ought to write in such an unguarded fashion. If the critic is doing his job, then even the highest genius ought to have some defining characteristic that a mere mortal might describe and mere mortals might understand. If this is so, then Hassid's divine center is the unequaled penetrating richness of his tone, and not just in the long notes played on the lower strings,

1 *Josef Hassid: The Complete Recordings.* EMI HMV Treasury EH 29 12301. The reverse side of this LP is devoted to relatively less significant, though still impressive, recordings made in Berlin in 1938 by the American violin virtuoso Ruggiero Ricci.

2 *The Book of the Violin,* edited by Dominic Gill, was published by Rizzoli in 1984. It gives Hassid's dates as 1923-50.

3 *The Art of Fritz Kreisler—The Acoustic Victor Recordings* (1910-1925). Strad LB1/5.

4 With the coming of electrical recording, of course, Kreisler—and other great violinists—did record longer and vastly more serious works. In Kreisler's case, as recording technology improved, his playing grew less polished and secure.

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where richness comes naturally to players of high ability; all the notes Hassid plays, whether fast or slow, short or long, legato or *spiccato,* are fully resonant, as if he has *imagined* them to the depth of his being. Not once does Hassid produce the thin, wiry tone so easy to confuse these days with brilliance; instead he plays every display passage with the same fullness other violinists reserve for the big tunes. And so all through the formidable technical traps of these pieces, traps that today's violinists solve in the fashion of so many callow Olympic hurdlers, Hassid plays melodies that dance and charm—and enter the listener's heart.

What would this mere boy have done with the real meat of the violinist's repertory, with the great concertos of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms and the equally great solo works of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms? Would he have (to use the vogue word) "grown"? Though it is clear that his playing did ripen extraordinarily in the year between his test pressing of the Elgar *La Capricieuse* and the issued recording, for poor Hassid, alas, getting older meant ruin, as it does in one way or another for so many child prodigies.

One child prodigy who managed by force of will to remain violinistically more or less alive through (and after) this tortuous transition from youth to adulthood was, of course, Yehudi Menuhin. Indeed, in listening to Hassid one's responses time and again repeat those inspired by the ineffable records Menuhin made at the age of twelve, and continued to make for a very few years thereafter. Heard today these Menuhin records—unique in their beauty until the re-discovery of the Hassid discs—encapsulate an otherworldly purity.[5] Though I hardly wish to make an argument for reincarnation, it is tempting to remark that Hassid, in a curious way, achieved in his playing of these small pieces what Menuhin's full and unforced maturity might have been, and was not.

On the overpowering evidence of his few records, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Josef Hassid was the greatest violinist of whose playing we can have any firm knowledge. About his early death, we can only echo the famous words of Grillparzer on the monument at Schubert's grave:

> Die Tonkunst begrub hier einen reichen Besitz
> Aber noch viel schönere Hoffnungen.
>
> Music has here entombed a rich treasure,
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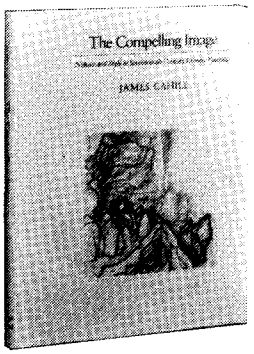

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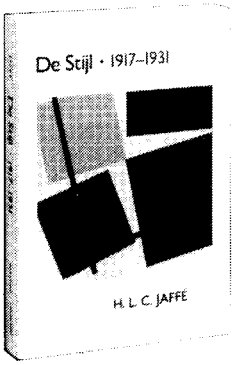

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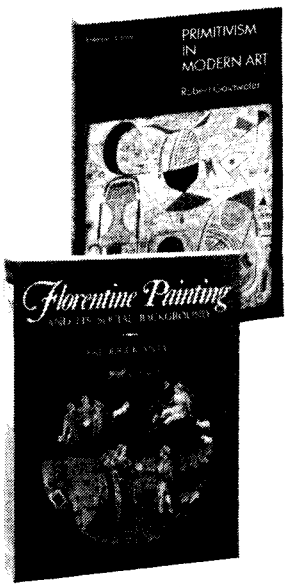

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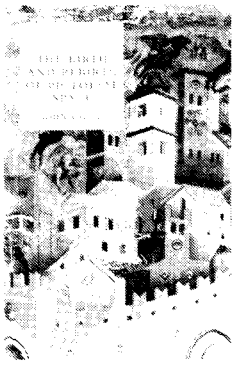

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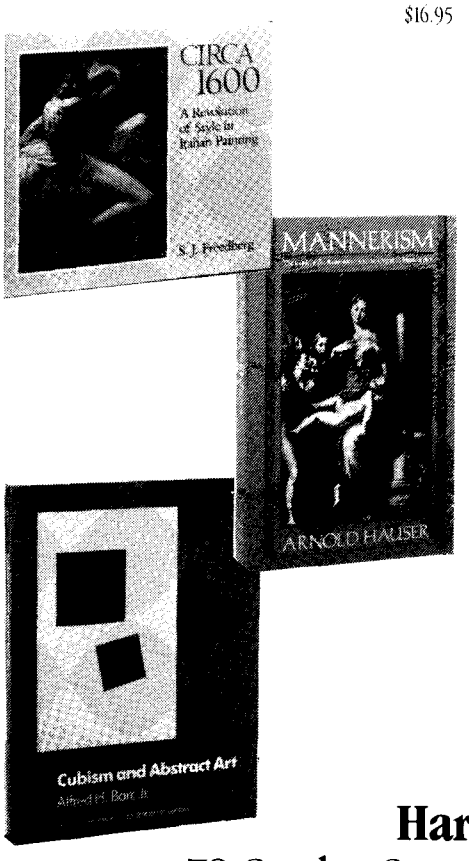

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Art

Welcome to Berlin

by Jed Perl

"Berlinart 1961-1987," at the Museum of Modern Art this past summer, was a show that wore its heart pinned ostentatiously on its sleeve.[1] The galleries were lined with paintings done in a thumpingly Expressionist vein. Most of the remainder of the one hundred and fifty works by fifty-five artists were neo-Dadaist gimcrackery—assemblages, found objects, and the like. Though the paintings weren't especially large by contemporary standards, many of them were too big for the galleries. They loomed forward, overwhelming the glass-fronted cases full of artists' booklets and collagelets. Nothing harmonized; the galleries had a helter-skelter look. Kynaston McShine, senior curator in MOMA's department of painting and sculpture and the organizer of "Berlinart," had transformed the Modern's temporary exhibition spaces into a playground of the avant-garde. This playground—decorated with the sights of West Berlin in the wake of the Cold War—was melancholy, run down. There was barbed wire, darkness, dirt. "Berlinart" was all sloppy surfaces and portentous undercurrents. The art may not have been anything much, but the subtexts—of East-West relations, war and peace, the Nazi past—were being played for everything they were worth.

Since the Sixties a good deal of national and international money has been injected into the Western sector of Berlin in a largely successful effort to turn the city into West Germany's art center. The plentifulness of such artists' subsidies as the DAAD Fellowships (which brought Allan Kaprow and Edward Kienholz, among others, to the city), along with the city's tradition of cultural and sexual recklessness, has made West Berlin very popular among the contemporary international avant-garde. Eleven of the artists in "Berlinart"—including Christo, David Hockney, and Malcolm Morley—have been visitors to Berlin from the West; others, such as Georg Baselitz, are refugees from the Eastern bloc. Artists come to Berlin, get caught up in the strange mood of the place, and stay. The American novelist Edmund White has said that visiting Berlin made him feel an anxiety "unlike anything I'd ever felt before in my travels . . . . In New York I feel overwrought but optimistic, in Paris sane if sad, but in Berlin I was *anxious* in both senses of the word—excited and uneasy."

White—and other admirers of the city—refer those of us who haven't experienced Berlin firsthand to Peter Schneider's short novel *The Wall Jumper,* published in Ger-

1 "Berlinart 1961-1987" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from June 4 to September 8, and will be on display at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from October 22 through January 3, 1988. A catalogue with the same name, edited by Kynaston McShine, with essays by René Block, Laurence Kardish, Karl Ruhrberg, *et al.,* has been published by the Museum of Modern Art/Prestel (282 pages, $25).

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many in 1982.[2] Schneider summons up the Wall indirectly, through accounts of the famous or bizarre crossings that have taken place since the structure went up in 1961. The folklore of the Wall—brought into play by Schneider with a casualness that gives his novel its contemporary charm—is, of course, a metaphor for the things that divide us. But the image of the Wall is also the glue that holds together the narrator's fractured reminiscences of evenings in cafés, visits to the Eastern sector, life in an old apartment building, and a love affair gone bad. While the narrator—like, probably, most of West Berlin's bohemian populace—takes a certain leftism for granted, he's not attached to any particular political hopes or ideas. The conversations he has with his friend Pommerer, a dissident writer who lives in the Eastern sector of the city, are circular, dull, fatalistic. Everyone, it turns out, is more a prisoner of his national identity than one might wish to believe. In *The Wall Jumper* there isn't much free will. While Berliners resent the Wall, they also depend on it as a source of national definition—it tells them, East or West, who they really are.

The "Berlinart" show was full of the iconography of Schneider's novel. We saw the airplanes that take visitors in and out of the city; the dark streets; the interesting, squalid night life. To celebrate Berlin is to celebrate the artificiality of the place—an essence, perhaps, of modern urban experience, which no one, after all, ever claimed would be easy. At "Berlinart" the violent, ironic spirit of the city is invoked through a few stark oil-paint images: K. H. Hödicke's screeching black and yellow cat (called *Nocturne*); Helmut Middendorf's zany, break-dancing *Painter*. I say images advisedly—they hold you in the manner of emblems or graphic signs; they don't come to life as paintings, as fulfilled works of art.

In modern art, Expressionism invariably spells dissent—from norms of behavior in the aesthetic, social, and political realms. It's a natural style to express disaffection, and probably came easily to the German artists of the years after World War II, who had every reason to be cynical and pessimistic. Expressionism also attracted the postwar generation because it had a tradition in Germany—in the Weimar Republic, and, some would say, in earlier centuries. (A number of survivors of the old guard—including Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, and Max Kaus—taught at Berlin's College of Visual Arts after the war.) While it's tempting to see the Expressionism of recent years as an extension of the work of the Teens and Twenties, the pre-Nazi heritage may actually have been something of a liability for artists coming up in the Fifties and Sixties. Much of post-World War II Expressionism has a dangerously parodistic element. Even Donald Kuspit, a supporter of the new Expressionism, has observed, "It is hard, today, to authentically strike the note of strangeness or estrangement that was so crucial to the original Expressionists." We're seeing the jagged figures and camp-fire-bright colors for a second time. The effects are leftover, reheated.

The great Expressionists—Grünewald, El Greco, Picasso in the Thirties—distort nature so completely as to produce through their distortions a new kind of completeness. They may do violence to the traditions of figure composition, but they're in full command of those traditions, and so no matter how violent their manner may become we aren't left confused—our trust is never violated. Max Beckmann is the only modern German who understands Expressionism in this positive sense. Kirchner, Kokoschka, and Schmidt-Rottluff may be living through an authentic existential crisis; they're full of rage, they're lashing out; but they don't have enough of a grasp of painting as an ongoing history. They're strongest in their graphic work, where undertones and resonances aren't essential. Their paintings have too much the air of random gestures—hasty, reactive, superficial. To the extent that post-World War II artists such as Baselitz, Middendorf, and

2 *The Wall Jumper* was published in the United States by Pantheon in 1984.

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Hödicke mean to return to an old modern standard of national style, they're confusing a non-repeatable aesthetic revolt with a usable past.

The best among the Expressionists in "Berlinart" have raw talent and little more. Certainly Rainer Fetting has it. Born in 1949, Fetting teamed up in 1977 with Middendorf, Salomé, and Bernd Zimmer to form the Galerie am Moritzplatz in Berlin, where much of the new Expressionism had its first showing. Fetting's big, homoerotic *Large Shower* is a rip-snortingly flashy piece of painting. It's a sixteen-foot-long scrawl—black and blue profiles with slashes of red and yellow flesh. Fetting works like a stage designer, setting the mood. And he keeps the twists and turns of paint vague enough that we feel as detached from the *Large Shower* as we do from a theatrical backdrop. *Large Shower* is a painting to do something in front of; it's all premise with no development, no follow-through.

"Berlinart" brought the Museum of Modern Art back to a taste for sloppy, sensationalist figure painting last featured in the "New Images of Man" show of 1959. Salomé, one of the younger painters in "Berlinart," was represented by a *Self-Portrait* in clown makeup, red jockstrap, and barbed-wire-clad legs. He plays the loneliness-of-humanity theme in rather the way Bay Area realists like Nathan Olivera did a quarter century ago. Salomé vacuum packs a vertical shaft of Man into a lot of flat, unembellished paint. In both Fifties California and contemporary Berlin the artists seem blissfully unaware that metaphysics and deep psychology are best left at the studio door. Only provincials try to express emotions so directly. The roomful of paintings at MOMA by Baselitz, who was born in 1938 and was a guru for the new German Expressionists, presented the artist as butcher, serving up pieces of human flesh. Baselitz doesn't construct the figure—he alludes to it, as a symbol charged with all kinds of inchoate but sinister implications. Picasso may disfigure nature; Baselitz and the other new German Expressionists disfigure art.

If the Expressionism of "Berlinart" is meant to add up to one of those end-of-formalism statements, it makes a very weak case. While the formalists of the Sixties underestimated the range of experience that could be expressed in modern art, these Berlin Expressionists are all too caught up in the glamour of subject matter. There's a conventional and even gossipy attitude lurking behind their angst. The painting is illustrative in the worst sense of the word.

Life may be a hell of a lot more important than art—but who ever went to an art museum to find *that* out? The story told in "Berlinart" is full of the politics of the Sixties and Seventies—the Wall, the anti-war protests, the ecology movement. The informative catalogue includes some photographs of the late Joseph Beuys, looking a bit Buster Keatonish as he presides over the youth revolt in his ubiquitous hat. As a member of that youth revolt who would do it all over again, I think I understand the mystique of a Beuys work such as *Sweep Up,* a plexiglass box full of some litter that was collected with a red broom after a 1972 May Day demonstration in Karl Marx Square in West Berlin. *Sweep Up* is a plea for litter-free cities, an archeological dig into the politics of protest, a nostalgic souvenir of a moment of solidarity. It's all of this—but it's meaningless as art. Who wants to look at some old trash and a wooden broom lying at the bottom of a plex box? As a museum piece *Sweep Up* was dead on arrival. Which, depending on your point of view, says something devastating about museums, or about Joseph Beuys.

The work of Beuys and the Fluxus group —who did performances and sent little art packages through the mail on both sides of the Atlantic for several decades—is generally praised for its wit, drama, magic, mystery. The engine that really drives all of it is something more like Fear of Cuteness. When you park a Volvo station wagon with shovels spilling out of its hatchback in an art gallery, as Beuys did in his 1983-85 piece *S.I.U. Dfesa Della Natura,* you're working out of no

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known pattern, you're trying to get from ground zero to something totally new, and you're liable to get stalled in the precincts of novelty—the work is in danger of looking cute. Stripping down and scaling up kept cuteness at bay in Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual Art. Beuys, with his more saturnine European sensibility, added to the Anti-Cuteness Arsenal the gross-out (as in a dead rabbit carried around a gallery) and (this is the ultimate) his own true-life tale of death and resurrection. Much of Beuys's work grew out of the central experience of his life—a close encounter with death that occurred during his stint as a German fighter pilot during World War II. His plane was shot down over the Crimea and he was saved from sub-zero temperatures by nomadic Tartars, who wrapped his freezing body in fat and felt. It's a great story, full of interesting implications, which engendered from the studio of Joseph Beuys many stupid-looking pieces of fat and felt that have ended up hanging, leaning, and lying in art galleries and museums around the world.

Though anything is possible in art, most things are impossible. And most things that are possible have been done, in one way or another. Environmental art? Think of Bernini's fountains and the twisting paths in the Boboli Gardens. Real creativity is in the slight variations—the shifts in point of view, in the uses of technique—that add a degree or two to our field of vision. At certain places, "Berlinart" looked like a dumping ground for experiments gone awry. There were exhibition cases full of collages and limited-edition books that had a wayward, melancholy tone. These included many odd little bits of paper full of private jokes, insider's information—doodled on, colored in, printed up, put in boxes, sold in galleries. This graphic work is superficially hermetic. It lacks the decorative or typographical élan that has kept some of the original Dada pamphlets alive by turning anti-art propaganda into art.

For the Museum of Modern Art, "Berlinart" represented a bow to Neo-Expression-

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ism and the contemporary international avant-garde. As a media event, however, it came some years too late. Opinion makers in New York had long ago wearied of Neo-Expressionism, and the news that there's news from Europe has been told too often to be even moderately diverting. In trying to be with-it, MOMA seemed all the more out-of-it; yet our premier modern-art museum will no doubt keep trying to be with-it, because with-it is what the audience thinks it wants. No one ever learns from the mistakes of the recent past—not from the incoherent "International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture" with which MOMA reopened in 1984 (organized, like "Berlinart," by Kynaston McShine); not from the namby-pambiness of MOMA's recently resuscitated "Projects" series, which features little solo shows of contemporary art (it ought to be called the "Compromises" series). MOMA's attempts to cover the contemporary scene are band-aid operations. Worse yet—the Museum passes off advocacy as history; it grinds axes while pretending to build a consensus. Whatever one may think of the taste represented by such relatively youthful New York institutions as the New Museum, P. S. 1, and the Clocktower, they do perform a community service. They make no bones about being in the business of promoting certain ideas; they reflect the interests of a substantial segment of the New York art world (and they sometimes get to artists before they've been had for lunch by the commercial galleries). The Modern, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney ought to know by now that they have a different role to play in this great center of art. They're the guardians of the past. And while they're wasting their energy on biennials, surveys, mid-career retrospectives, they've forfeited their real obligation, which is to bring us such great shows as late Braque, Bonnard, the Delaunays, Arp, John Graham—none of which have been or will be seen in New York.

MOMA has always had an interest in historical shows—they were part of the Museum's program from the first. Only recently, though, has MOMA become interested in apocalyptic shows. In a period of prosperity the middle class likes to titillate itself with fantasies of its own demise—preferably against some foreign backdrop, and, if at all possible, *mit Schlag*. Such was the attraction of the "Vienna" show in the summer of 1986, an exhibition that was long on ambience and short on significant art. When you told people that Klimt (the main attraction at "Vienna") wasn't a great painter, they sometimes agreed, but they rushed to defend the show, saying something about Wittgenstein, Freud, Strauss—none of whom was included, all of whom were in the air. "Berlinart" was a Vienna show for the jet-lag generation. It was another look at the nerve ends of capitalist culture, only this time without the Wiener Werkstatte frills. Graffiti is the new ornamental style. "Berlinart" was a fantasy about the ultimate Cold War town, the town where the Cold War got hot and spewed forth its symbols: a Wall, a Gate. The art provided the fantasy props. You were supposed to provide the imagination that brought the fantasy to life. You were supposed to make believe you were knee-deep in the anxiety of Berlin, only not one of the one hundred and fifty works on display could make you believe. "Berlinart" was an embarrassment.

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Dance

The Bolshoi at the Met

by Eva Resnikova

Anyone who doubts that the Bolshoi Ballet's American summer tour had as much to do with politics and hype as it did with Art had only to peruse the opening paragraph of the "Greeting" from Bruce Crawford, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, that prefaced the lavishly produced souvenir program:

> Pride and enormous satisfaction are felt at the Metropolitan Opera as the Bolshoi Ballet, one of the glories of the dance world, returns to the United States after far too long an absence. The company's visit comes at an historic moment—just as our countries reach new agreements and understanding. Through the arts, the universal language, all people are one people, and through programs of cultural exchange, our knowledge of others, as well as of ourselves, grows richer, more precise, more profound.

What amazes and disturbs in Crawford's statement is not so much what is said as what is left unsaid. The Bolshoi's "far too long an absence" from this country is, after all, owing to the fact that on its last visit here, in 1979, it lost three of its principal dancers through defection; and whatever "new agreements and understanding" may at present exist between the Soviet Union and the United States, the reasons why Soviet dancers defect have not changed. This fact of life was graphically illustrated on the cover of the souvenir program and on the posters, both of which conspicuously featured Gediminas Taranda, the Bolshoi's first-cast Abderakhaman in *Raymonda* and Yashka in *The Golden Age,* who was denied permission to accompany the tour—evidently at the last minute, and presumably not for artistic reasons.

What has all this to do with "the arts, the universal language [through which] all people are one people"? Plenty. A teenaged American ballet student taking a summer course in New York would have had the opportunity to see, in the month of June alone, New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the Paris Opéra Ballet, the Netherlands Dance Theater, and the Bolshoi—and that was only at Lincoln Center. Irek Mukhamedov, the Moscow troupe's premier danseur, arrived on these shores without ever having seen any American dance except on videotape.

The Bolshoi's politically imposed isolation from the rest of the world of dance cannot but have a profound effect on both its style and its inflated self-image. It was the latter—the Bolshoi mystique—that, more than anything, sold out the Met at inflated prices for three solid weeks. The dancing itself was largely second-rate, and the programming unpromising, consisting exclusively of works by the Bolshoi's longtime artistic director, Yuri Grigorovich: his "improved" versions of two classics, *Giselle* and *Raymonda*; a typical Bolshoi "Highlights" program sandwiched between an act each

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from his *Romeo and Juliet* and *Spartacus*; and his re-staging of Shostakovich's 1930 socialist-realist ballet *The Golden Age.*

The Bolshoi style, as it became known in the West following the company's first visits to London and New York in the Fifties, was not overly concerned with classical correctness. The extended leg in arabesque was allowed to bend, the knee in attitude to drop below the toe, wrists to droop. But this willful breaking of the classical line was done in the interests of creating a distinctive plastique, a sculptural quality that was immediately recognizable as "Bolshoi." The technical failures displayed by the current crop of Moscow dancers, however, are of an entirely different nature. Rare is the dancer who consistently points his toes, maintains his turnout, and displays clean fifth positions in movement. Linking steps are often merely sketched in, and preparations given undue emphasis. It is not uncommon for a Bolshoi dancer simply to walk into position, settle into his preparation, and wait for the music to catch up with him before launching into his grande pirouette or manège of double assemblés.

The dancers seem dead from the knee down: there is no sharpness in the action of instep or knee, which makes mush of ballonnés, ballottés, passés, and ronds de jambe, as well as of small beating steps such as entrechats and brisés. As a result, the dancers are slow: they would be lost in the filigree intricacies of a work like Balanchine's *Divertimento No. 15,* or in anything by Bournonville. Then there are such shockingly elementary faults as Giselle's wagging extended leg in her partnered travelling arabesques, and Conrad's sagging elbows in his final pose on one knee in the *Corsaire* pas de deux.

The Bolshoi dancers have lost these details of classical style not because they are intrinsically bad dancers or lazy but because for over two decades they have been force-fed a steady diet of Grigorovich's choreography. It is choreography that shapes a dancer's style after he has passed through his eight or ten years of basic training, and Grigorovich's ballets have rendered the current younger generation of Bolshoi dancers unable to perform the works of their classical heritage in proper style. Niceties such as clean fifth positions and pointed toes aren't important in the context of Grigorovich's choreography, and quick, small steps simply don't exist.

Grigorovich obviously means to redress the ballet's traditional favoring of the ballerina. But the enlargement of the danseur's vocabulary does not have to entail an attitude of machismo. There is a world of difference between the manipulative acrobatics of a typical Grigorovich coupling and the lyrical virtuosity, kitschy as it may be, of an earlier genre of bravura pas de deux like Asaf Messerer's *Spring Waters,* with its deliciously vulgar one-handed running crotch-lift exit (botched on both occasions I saw it as part of the Bolshoi's "Highlights" program). In a BBC documentary shown on cable TV this spring, a somewhat rueful Messerer expressed second thoughts about the monster he may have helped to create. After viewing some rare film footage from 1913 of Ekaterina Geltzer and Vasily Tikhomirov, who epitomized the pre-revolutionary Bolshoi style, Messerer remarked (in translation): "The choreographers of that time laid more stress on the small movements. Today, these small movements are gone. It's all broad movements. It could be a result of the content of many of these ballets. Sometimes it seems a shame that some of the smaller movements are no longer with us."

Though one would not guess it from the recent tour and its accompanying propaganda, a deep split exists within the Bolshoi between the current regime and some members of an older generation of dancers, most notably Maya Plisetskaya and Vladimir Vasiliev and his wife, Ekaterina Maximova. (The only dancer of this generation included in the tour was Mrs. Grigorovich, Natalia Bessmertnova.) The dissidents cannot be openly quashed because their political cre-

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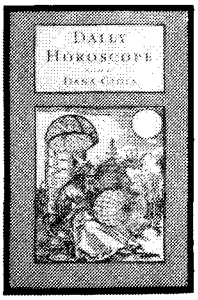

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dentials are impeccable: Plisetskaya and Vasiliev are People's Artists of the Soviet Union and recipients of the Lenin Prize. Instead, they are permitted to travel and perform with foreign troupes: control through *glasnost.*

A report from Moscow in the *Times* just before the Bolshoi opened at the Met discussed some of the rumors that had been circulating earlier in the spring about a possible revolt within the company against Grigorovich. In the BBC documentary, the dissenting dancers expressed guarded criticism. Maximova decried the emphasis that is now placed on bravura technique at the expense of expressiveness; Vasiliev voiced his belief that the Bolshoi dancers ought to be exposed to a wider variety of styles; Plisetskaya complained that the company spends too much time touring and is unwilling to try anything new. Even Galina Ulanova, the darling of the Bolshoi establishment, who coaches a select group of dancers and travels in style with the company on tour, shyly expressed her belief that the "misfortune" of the Bolshoi is that it cannot experiment.

The Bolshoi's family dispute can be confusing to the outsider. Everyone seems to be in favor of the new and agrees on the necessity of retaining the classical ballet base. All agree on the desirability of the expression of the dancer's inner emotions through the creation of a character, and that this expression should be done through dance, not mime, as it had been in dance dramas like Leonid Lavrovsky's 1946 *Romeo and Juliet,* now considered hopelessly outdated. Grigorovich calls his "updating" of the classics through the elimination of mime and his original all-dance story ballets neoclassicism. We in the West identify the term with Balanchine, and especially with his non-programmatic ballets; but to the Soviets this is the dreaded formalism. The Bolshoi establishment as well as its critics profess to seeing ballet as a means of personal expression, yet socialist realism decrees the portrayal of easily recognizable "types." Traditional ballet mime is considered an

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aristocratic vestige unintelligible to the average viewer, but its replacement is meaningless: dancing that fails to convey any drama, or a dumb show consisting largely of dancers walking around with their arms open. (To the music intended to accompany Giselle's mother's vision of her daughter's fate, we get only a pained expression on her face.)

New York dance audiences are purported to be the most sophisticated in the world; but the summer crowd that packed the Met night after night could have been imported from Moscow, to judge from its collusion in the Bolshoi's display of bad stage manners. The music was constantly interrupted to allow dancers to take bows in mid-variation—after Odile's thirty-two fouettés, for instance. (Doesn't the audience know that every corps girl does this at the end of class?) The dancers milked the audience for applause shamelessly. Even Mukhamedov, with a stage demeanor more modest than most, acknowledged the ovation after his second-act *Giselle* variation, which ends with him falling exhausted to the ground, by wearily lifting himself up on one elbow.

There seems little point in attempting a detailed critical evaluation of individual dancers, since I was able to see only one cast in each major role and was not given any choice as to what cast that might be. The public-relations company hired by the Met was extraordinarily loath to part with press tickets, though critics were invited to purchase house seats at sixty dollars a head, which suggests that the real point of this one-sided "cultural exchange" (is the Met going to Moscow?) was not even propaganda but hard currency. (I managed to buy my way into the topmost balcony for a second "Highlights" program, where the audience was far better behaved than the high rollers in the orchestra.)

The only work completely unknown to New York was *The Golden Age*. The new plot makes no more sense than the old one, and the characters are as one-dimensional. More disturbing even than Grigorovich's endless string of interchangeable apache pas de deux is the ambiguousness of his attitude. Does he really believe in his white-clad working-class hero and black-clad decadent bourgeois villain, or is he putting us on? The whole enterprise reeks of cynicism and is degrading to the dancers, who throw themselves into their roles with their customary conviction and naïve sincerity. (A hint of irony emerged only in the banished Taranda's performance of the villain's role in the videotaped version shown on cable TV.) The slapdash scenery and hideous costumes in this ballet, as in all the others, were by Simon Virsaladze, who is especially partial to dividing dancers down the middle and dressing each half in a different color. No one claimed responsibility for the lighting, which ranged from amateurish to annoying.

Grigorovich's re-staging of *Raymonda* makes you think back fondly to Nureyev's, and his *Giselle* makes you long for Ballet Theatre's, which isn't saying much in either case. The only fun in the overlong "Highlights" program was provided by Lyudmila Semenyaka's leering Black Swan and by the Felliniesque mass curtain call at the end of the section, with old friends like Odile and Siegfried, the Poet and his Sylphide, Kitri and Basil, Aurora and Désiré, Conrad and Medora, and the Dying Swan, as well as new ones like Vayou and Niriti, Queen Mekhmeneh Bahnu and Ferkhad, all lined up across the front of the stage bowing and curtsying, meticulously in character.

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Books

The androgynous Papa Hemingway

by James W. Tuttleton

"It's a hell of a nuisance once they've had you certified as nutty," Nick said. "No one ever has any confidence in you again."
—Ernest Hemingway, "A Way You'll Never Be"

The posthumous publication last year of Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*—based on unfinished manuscripts that lay in the vault for more than twenty-five years after Hemingway's death—created something of a double sensation in literary circles. Begun in 1946, this novel was intended by Hemingway to be his most extensive and mature treatment of the themes of good and evil, innocence and corruption, and sex in its relation to the literary art. But the size and complexity of his imaginative task and Hemingway's physical injuries and illnesses, culminating finally in a full-blown case of depressive paranoia and his suicide in 1961, prevented him from completing the work, although it deeply absorbed him for nearly two decades.

The manuscript of *The Garden of Eden* exists in three irreconcilable drafts of varying lengths. To get the story into publishable shape, Tom Jenks, a Scribner's editor, did a cut-and-paste job on the longest of these manuscripts (a version of some twelve hundred pages)—deleting a great deal, changing around much else—thus producing the version that we now have. The result bears a suspicious resemblance to Thomas Wolfe's last two novels, which by common consent are now to be seen as the "compositions" of his Harper's editor, Edward Aswell. In any case, so altered and manipulated were the Hemingway manuscripts that, in the March 9 issue of *The New Republic,* Barbara Probst Solomon pronounced the Scribner's version of *The Garden of Eden* a "travesty" and even worse: "I can report that Hemingway's publisher has committed a literary crime."

Setting aside the literary ethics of publishing unfinished and incoherent manuscripts, not to speak of altering them as Scribner's has done, *The Garden of Eden* was no less sensational for its revelation of Hemingway's sudden and unexpected pre-occupation with transsexual fantasies, androgyny, and gender-merging. While no adequate précis of *The Garden of Eden* texts can be given here, suffice it to say that the story involves a rather passive writer named David Bourne and his wife Catherine, who cuts off her hair and begins to insist on playing the role of a boy while making love. Into their world arrives a rather shadowy young woman named Marita, who at first sleeps with Catherine but comes to be sexually shared by David as well. Hemingway once referred to its theme as "the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose."

The major themes of the book—the introduction of sexual evil into the writer's world, the loss of youthful innocence, and the relation of this experience to the writer David's struggle to create his art—clearly suggest Hemingway's *ménage à trois* with his

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wife Hadley and Pauline Pfeiffer (who, after living with the Hemingways for a while, eventually became his second wife). The novel also intimates the Left Bank lesbian underworld of the 1920s, a world that included Natalie Barney, Solita Solano, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Jinny Pfeiffer (Pauline's sister, to whom Hemingway may also have been drawn). Moreover, the book has a clear connection with Fitzgerald and his difficulties as a writer; for Zelda at one point told Fitzgerald that he was sexually inadequate, insinuated that he and Hemingway were homosexual lovers, engaged in an affair with Edouard Jozan, and, as she came unhinged, was herself drawn to other women. In any case, the sexually passive novelist and the sexual perversities in *The Garden of Eden* appear to have destroyed the last vestiges of the myth of Hemingway as the Man's Man, the stoic soldier, the virile boxer, the macho big-game hunter and lover of women par excellence.

The myth of Hemingway's Absolute Masculinity was no doubt his supreme fiction, and he wrote and rewrote the story of it assiduously throughout his lifetime. Yet the myth rested on a bedrock of fact—those flamboyant masculine experiences that set him apart from most writers, whose lives are spent largely in the study. Hemingway's combat injuries at Fossalta di Piave in World War I, his Greco-Turkish war correspondence, his vivid expatriate life in Paris in the Twenties, his wild adventures in the world of Spanish bullfighting, his daredevil journalism in the Spanish Civil War and World War II, the airplane crashes and jeep collisions, the African safaris, the big-game hunts in Wyoming, the deep-sea fishing in the Caribbean, his four marriages and many affairs, his hard drinking, hard fighting, and hard loving—all of these enchanted the reporters, made good copy, and contributed to the legend of the Man's Man, an image confirmed in superb works of fiction like *In Our Time, The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms,* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

Of course, the myth of Hemingway's exceptional virility began to come under heavy bombardment even during the author's lifetime. Women writers, homosexual victims of Hemingway satire, and plain literary wimps were always ready to invent or purvey gossip about his so-called manliness, and occasionally it reached the press. Stein publicly called him "yellow" in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* and in 1933 Max Eastman published a review, called "Bull in the Afternoon," in which he remarked that

> some circumstance seems to have laid upon Hemingway a continual sense of the obligation to put forth evidences of red-blooded masculinity. It must be made obvious not only in the swing of the big shoulders and the clothes he puts on, but in the stride of his prose style and the emotions he permits to come to the surface there. This trait of his character has . . . begotten a veritable school of fiction-writers—a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on his chest.

For Eastman and his friends, it was "of course a commonplace that Hemingway lacks the serene confidence that he *is* a full-sized man." Furthermore, Frederic Prokosch, in "Voices: A Memoir," published in *The New Criterion* in 1983, suggested that others were on to Hemingway. As he recounts it, when Lady Emerald Cunard met Hemingway in 1944, she told Cyril Connolly:

> "I was startled . . . . Not a bit what I expected. You may think it bizarre of me but he struck me as androgynous." Connolly replied that that was a very peculiar word to apply to Hemingway. "I am sure that it is," she said. "It is not the *mot juste,* perhaps. But that's how he struck me. Distinctly emasculated."

But despite the jealous sniping, Hemingway could usually be counted on, during his lifetime, to defend his virility—sometimes by punching out his detractor the next time he saw him at the Scribner's office, or by paying him (or her) back, in print, with interest (as, for example, in *A Moveable Feast*). Without question he was one of the nastier lit-

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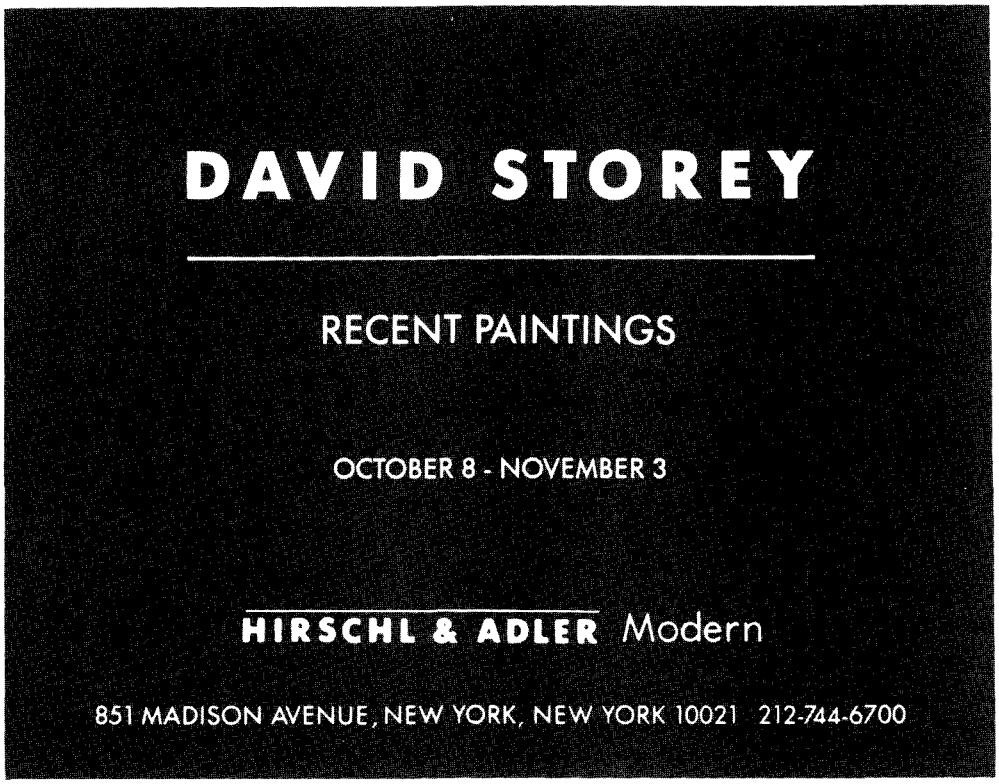
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erary pugilists of his time. His death, by suicide, however, seemed to give his detractors the last word about Hemingway's so-called manliness. Evidently he took, like his suicide-father, the coward's way out.

Missing, throughout the writer's lifetime, was an adequate explanation of *why* the masculine pose was so important to Ernest Hemingway. Zelda Fitzgerald might aver that Scott's hairy-chested friend was "as phony as a rubber check" and a fairy to boot, but insinuations about Hemingway's alleged homosexuality never rang true or proved out from any evidence. Nor did Carlos Baker's monumental, fact-filled *Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969) make it clear why the novelist should have presented himself as the he-man extraordinaire. Some of the more recent lives, like Jeffrey Meyers's *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985), Peter Griffin's *Along With Youth* (1985), and Michael Reynolds's *The Young Hemingway* (1986), have dealt more or less responsibly with the facts but, again, always without making the inner workings of the writer understandable to the reader.

With the publication now of Kenneth S. Lynn's *Hemingway*[1] readers are at last in a position to begin to understand the psychological and emotional dynamics of Hemingway the man and to grasp how the elements of his inner life are manifest in the forms of his fiction. Lynn brings to his task the tools of a mature critic and biographer who is already well known for a variety of excellent works of literary and cultural criticism including *The Dream of Success, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, William Dean Howells: An American Life, Visions of America, A Divided People,* and *The Air-Line to Seattle.* But never before has Lynn or anyone else demonstrated the depth of psychological insight and understanding that is here brought to Hemingway's life and work. Lynn's biography, I hasten to say, is not clinically psychoanalytic; there is no obfuscating

1 *Hemingway,* by Kenneth S. Lynn; Simon & Schuster, 702 pages, $24.95.

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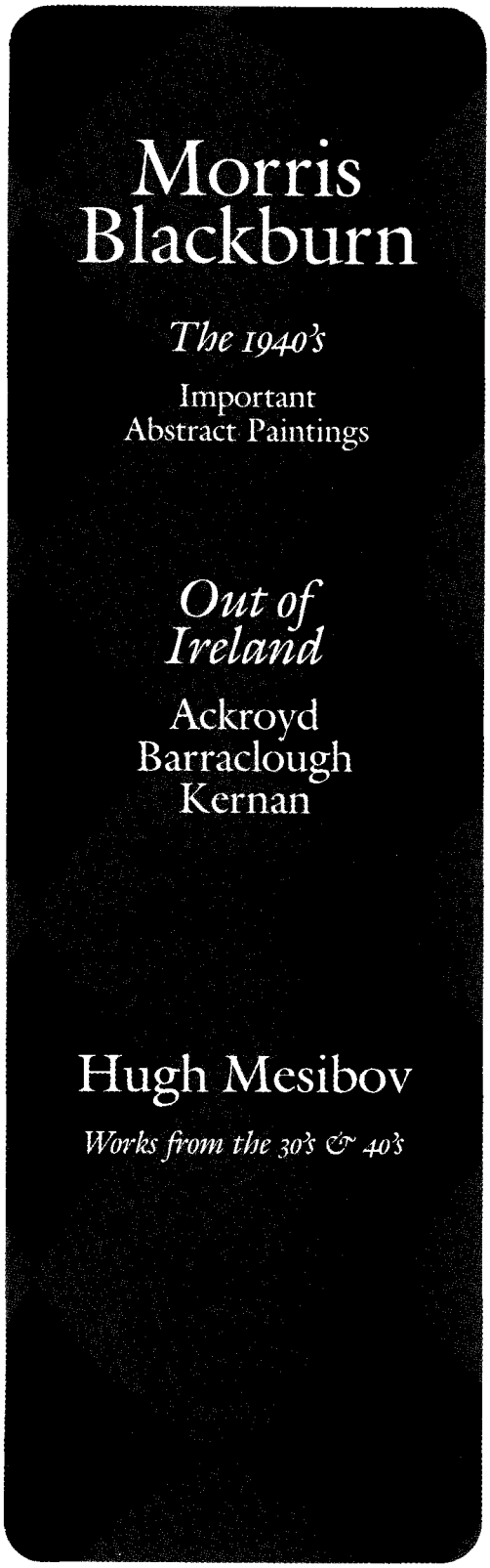

technical jargon here—no far-fetched recourse to psychic condensations, obscure displacements, or bizarre dream symbols invoked to explain the latent content of Hemingway's thought and work.

Much of this biography, in fact, is a straightforward re-creation of historical detail: what it was like to live in Oak Park, Illinois, where Hemingway was born in 1899; why Paris, where he lived in the 1920s, had so many horse-drawn vehicles; who went along on Hemingway's African safaris in the 1930s. On the level of fact, Lynn disputes, convincingly, some of the claims that Hemingway and others made about his exploits. While the evidence is plain that Hemingway was hit by more than two hundred pieces of trench mortar shrapnel at Fossalta di Piave, Lynn discounts the story that Hemingway was also hit by machine-gun fire as, in his wounded condition, he allegedly carried an Italian soldier to the rear. He demolishes the claim that Hemingway later fought with the Arditi in World War I. He disputes Hemingway's recollections about the origin of some of his stories and has nothing but contempt for the alleged veracity of Hemingway's account, in *A Moveable Feast,* of how he allayed Fitzgerald's sexual anxieties, induced by Zelda, by measuring the length of Fitzgerald's penis and pronouncing it normal. Finally, Lynn's analysis of Hemingway's political obtuseness, in allowing himself to be used by the American left-wingers and Spanish Communists during the Civil War in Spain, is definitive. But many of these considerations have been discussed by previous biographers. What is original in this life? And, in particular, what can it tell us about the elements of androgyny that underlay Hemingway's self-intoxication with masculinity?

The perverse sexual implications of *The Garden of Eden* are not, according to Lynn, a novelty. Properly read, many of Hemingway's previous works disclose similar transsexual fantasies, motifs of twinning, and incestuous overtones. The source of these, according to Lynn, is the writer's relationship to his mother Grace Hemingway, "the dark

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queen of Hemingway's world." One of the novelist's friends, Major General Charles T. Lanham, described that relationship very simply and directly: "he always referred to his mother as 'that bitch.' He must have told me a thousand times how much he hated her and in how many ways." But precisely *why* Hemingway hated his mother was never made perfectly clear. Stories like "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" and "Soldier's Home"—in their savage treatments of the mother figure—suggest that Grace was a possessive, dominant, and overbearing woman who had emasculated her husband. And since Hemingway clearly identified in youth with his father, who taught him everything there was to know about hunting and fishing, it was reasonable to infer that Hemingway thought his mother guilty of driving his father to suicide, a tragic event the novelist came to see as an act of cowardice. But, according to Lynn, the reason for Ernest's hatred of his mother goes deeper.

As the biographer recounts it, Hemingway suffered a deep psychosexual wound originating from his mother's treatment of him as a child. Grace Hemingway, who had a thing about twins, dressed young Ernest and his sister Marcelline (a year and a half older) in identical outfits—as twins of the same sex. Sometimes she dressed them in boys' clothes but just as often as little girls. (In a family scrapbook, on one of Ernest's photographs at age two, she wrote "summer girl," suggesting the extent to which she regarded him as female.) Furthermore, long after he ought to have been shorn, she insisted on Ernest's wearing his hair the length of a girl's. But, paradoxically and at the same time, she played up his masculinity and encouraged him to be a little man. Thus the seeds of an androgynous personality were planted: "Caught between his mother's wish to conceal his masculinity and her eagerness to encourage it, was it any wonder that he was anxious and insecure?"

According to Lynn, much of Hemingway's plain meanness to friends and lovers can be accounted for by an anxiety and insecurity arising out of Grace Hemingway's betrayal of his masculine identity:

> At some point . . . in his edenic infancy he awakened to an understanding of the situation in which his mother had placed him . . . . If he was [treacherous to friends and acquaintances], perhaps it was because he thought of himself as a victim of treachery long before he knew what to call it.

The relationship between Ernest and his "twin" sister Marcelline was a highly complicated one. Besides gender confusion, both children experienced confused ego boundaries and felt not merely twinned but androgynously and incestuously intimate. In adolescence, the tomboy Marcelline had a clear crush on her brother. He evidently repulsed this; offended, she later refused to go to his wedding to Hadley Richardson, a woman eight years his senior.

Hemingway, it would appear, may have turned from this problematic "twin" Marcelline to their younger sister Ursula. The incestuous overtones of the story "The Last Good Country" suggest that possibly they were intimate. Certainly in 1950 Hemingway wrote to Arthur Mizener that, when he came back from the war in 1919, his seventeen-year-old sister Ursula

> always used to wait, sleeping, on the stairway of the third floor stair-case to my room. She wanted to wake when I came in because she had been told it was bad for a man to drink alone. She would drink something light with me until I went to sleep and then she would sleep with me so I would not be lonely in the night. We always slept with the light on except she would sometimes turn it off if she saw I was asleep and stay awake and turn it on if she saw I was wakeing [*sic*].

In any case, there can be no doubt that Hemingway's stories are filled with love relationships where couples feel like "brother and sister," where the *length* of the woman's hair is itself fetishized (if that is possible), where the protagonist's penis is mutilated

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("God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," *The Sun Also Rises*), where reversals of gender or at least of coital position are suggested, or where Hemingway seems fascinated by the idea of sex with a lesbian woman. Paris was awash with lesbians in the 1920s, and he was not oblivious to the flamboyant posturing of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Djuna Barnes, Jane Heap, Winifred Ellerman, H. D., Margaret Anderson, and Solita Solano. He was remarkably close to a number of them and, even more surprising, he claimed to have been sexually attracted to the older and obese Gertrude Stein (who appears to have resembled Grace Hemingway in size). In 1948, Hemingway told W. G. Rogers, author of *When This You See, Remember Me: Gertrude Stein in Person,* that he had liked

> [Gertrude Stein] better before she cut her hair and that was sort of a turning point in all sorts of things. She used to talk to me about homosexuality and how it was fine in and for women and no good in men and I used to listen and learn and I always wanted to fuck her and she knew it and it was a good healthy feeling and made more sense than some of the talk.

As Lynn points out, Hemingway never directly fictionalized these lesbians. His protagonist in *The Sun Also Rises,* however, Jake Barnes, has a name suspiciously close to that of Natalie *Barney,* who lived at 20 rue *Jacob.* Does this tale—involving a hero without a penis who cannot penetrate the mannish Brett Ashley[2]—distortedly symbolize a transsexual fantasy of lesbian love? In the light of *The Garden of Eden,* Lynn's analysis of the book is compelling.

His treatment of gender merging in *A Farewell to Arms* is also persuasive. How are we to read the love scenes between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley? Is she a submissive woman to her virile lover? In bed, Catherine tells Frederic, "I'm you." She says, "Don't make up a separate me." "I want us to be all mixed up." She asks Frederic to let his hair grow and proposes to cut hers off, so they will be "the same." He is reluctant because, sexually passive, he likes to lie under her, to assume the "female position," enclosed in the tent of her hair. According to Lynn, these scenes are not evidence of the Hemingway woman's abject submission to masculine domination but rather transsexual fantasies that haunted Hemingway throughout his lifetime. In deriving their names from that of his friend Barklie Henry, Hemingway "thought of them as the two halves of an androgynous whole."

Likewise, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* the real issue between the lovers Maria and Robert Jordan is not macho domination of a mindless and compliant woman but rather Hemingway's recurrent fantasies of what it would be like to merge into a woman. Maria's head has been forcibly shaved by the fascists, but Jordan wants to take her to his barber in Madrid so that their hair can be styled identically, so that they will (twinlike) resemble each other. Lynn puts it this way:

> Pilar observes of them very early, "You could be brother and sister by the look," to which Maria replies, "Now I know why I have felt as I have. Now it is clear." Jordan, too, likes to think that he and Maria are related. "Maria is

2 The precise nature of Jake's wound is somewhat ambiguous in *The Sun Also Rises,* and some readers have concluded that he was castrated. But Jake's facetious conversation with his friend Bill, in which he refers to "the joystick," suggests a penis injury, as well as the airplane instrument. In 1958, George Plimpton raised this issue with Hemingway in a conversation subsequently published in *Writers at Work.* In the interview Plimpton casually remarked at Jake's having been "emasculated precisely as is a steer." Hemingway's response authorizes the interpretation of the wound that Lynn has properly assumed throughout the biography: "Who ever said Jake was 'emasculated precisely as is a steer'? Actually he had been wounded in quite a different way and his testicles were intact and not damaged. Thus he was capable of all normal feelings as a *man* but incapable of consummating them. The important distinction is that his wound was physical and not psychological and that he was not emasculated."

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> my true love and my wife. I never had a true love. I never had a wife. She is also my sister, and I never had a sister, and my daughter, and I never will have a daughter." In their nights of lovemaking in his sleeping robe, these look-alike siblinglike lovers feel so much a part of one another that it is as if they have merged ("I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other") and could switch identities if they wished ("if thou should ever wish to change I would be glad to change").

The important point here seems to be the recurrent and irresistible longing in some part of Hemingway's psyche to experience and recount life as it is felt by a woman.

The ultimate value of Lynn's biography is that it returns us to the idea that a writer's overt "political" themes—say, the effect of the "dirty war" on Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, or Frederic Henry—may conceal affective states originating in the very personal wounds received in childhood, wounds of which the author was not fully conscious. Even the elements of a literary style, according to Lynn, may be a manifestation of this kind of ill-understood trauma, rather than a reflection of the brevities of journalism or the corruptions of language in the patriotic rhetoric of wartime:

> To be a boy but to be treated like a girl. To feel impelled to prove your masculinity through flat denials of your anxieties . . . and bold lies about your exploits. To be forced to practice the most severe economy in your attempts to 'render' your life artistically, because your capital of self-understanding was too small to permit you to be expansive and your fear of self-exposure too powerful. To make a virtue of necessity by packing troubled feelings below the surface of your stories like dynamite beneath a bridge. To be tempted by your enormous ambition into writing a novel, despite the risks inherent in amplitude. To ascribe your protagonist's disablement to a flying accident in war-time Italy (an echo of the way in which D'Annunzio lost an eye), rather than to a subtler malaise. To turn the Great War, in fine, into a Great Explanation and proceed from there.

But if Hemingway's affective disorders had their origin in Grace Hemingway's disorientation of her son's sexual identity, it is worth remembering that androgyny has a literary history and a cultural provenance and may, at a particular time, be merely a theme, like any other. Freud had dignified for Hemingway's generation clinical matters that literature had mythicized and that sexologists like Krafft-Ebing had cloaked in Latin secrecy. Writers of the time were quick to bring to the surface of literature the new "psychological science." Sherwood Anderson, whose influence on Hemingway is demonstrable, wrote about such an imaginative sexual transformation in "The Man Who Became A Woman." Pound likewise invoked the double-sexed Tiresias in Canto I and made the Ovidian metamorphosis of men and women (into beasts, into trees, into the forms of one other) a central motif of his epic. And T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922) objectified in Tiresias ("Old man with wrinkled female breasts") both the genital wound that fascinated Hemingway and the motif of the two sexes merged into each other. Hemingway was not oblivious to these elements of literary modernism. Is it any wonder, then, that at the heart of *The Garden of Eden* he presents a symbol of androgyny: Rodin's statue of the merging sexes based on the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid? (References to the statue are unfortunately excised in the Scribner's edition.)

All writers, if they are any good, are capable of imagining what it is like to have the body of a member of the opposite sex and to have the feelings of that sex. The cultivation of an androgynous sensibility is a necessity of the artist; certainly it is a feature of what Keats called "the chameleon poet," who, emptied of himself, can be filled with the ideas and feelings of another wholly alien to him. But the imaginative taking over of another person's identity, especially of another person's sex, is especially problematical for the writer who already has a weak ego

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and an insecure sense of his own sexuality. Lynn has brilliantly shown what it was that caused Hemingway to be so anxious and insecure of his own masculinity and how he masked his confusions by flamboyant posturing as the Man's Man. It is hard to disagree with his conclusion that while Hemingway's "faults were terrible he was also a more truly heroic figure than even the gaudiest version of his myth would grant him."

The effect of Lynn's biography is to send us back to the novels and stories with a new and heightened sense of how intimately Hemingway longed to experience the sensibilities and sensations of a woman and how he dramatized those feelings. If Barbara Probst Solomon is correct in thinking that *The Garden of Eden* is "a sort of summa of Hemingway's aesthetics," with sexual metamorphosis as its cornerstone, the put-down feminist critics will have to take another look at his work, for things are evidently not as they seem. Stories like "Up in Michigan" and "Cat in the Rain," viewed in the light of Lynn's account of Hemingway's inner conflict, take on a new poignance and depth and set at naught the claim that Hemingway's women characters are nonentities. And the great novels in the Hemingway canon now require a full critical reconsideration, not as case studies of a neurosis but as dramatizations of some very old issues in male-female relationships—issues first suggested in Plato's myth about the androgynous soul in search of its twin.

Ann Beattie, art critic

Ann Beattie Alex Katz. Abrams, 91 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Eric Gibson

The "coffee-table" book—a large-format monograph written by a recognized authority and accompanied by lavish color reproductions—has long been an art publishing staple. But there's another, lesser-known version of it that also makes an occasional appearance. It features fewer reproductions and a much briefer text; it is usually easier to lift. The main difference, though, is that the text is written by a well-known personage from another walk of life, a celebrity. A decade ago, the Whitney Museum asked Michael Crichton, the best-selling author of *The Andromeda Strain,* to write the catalogue for its Jasper Johns retrospective, and there have been several examples since. Now Abrams, long known as a pioneer of the respectable kind of coffee-table book—the sort where a sober text cools the seductive appeal of the color plates—has made a contribution to this subgenre with *Alex Katz,* by Ann Beattie, a writer known for her fiction but heretofore unheard from on the subject of painting.

To judge from the cover of the book, on which the names appear in equal size, the correct title of this offering is *Alex Katz by Ann Beattie*—we read both names in one breath. The pairing is clearly intended by the publisher to signify the special status of the author in this enterprise. Far from playing second fiddle to her subject, Beattie is given an equal role. Anne Yarowsky, an editor at Abrams, explains the origins of the project in a prefatory note: "What would occur," she wondered, "if a writer were asked to examine the work of a painter of like imagination without the constraints of art historical reference or criticism . . . and approach the work with only a canvas full of images in front of him or her?" The problem with this idea is that it is based on at least two questionable assumptions: first, that the only skill you need to be able to write about art is a talent for writing of any kind; and second, that the specialized skills of the art historian get in the way of understanding art, that it takes an "innocent" to see art clearly. In this particular double bill, it was apparently expected that the "reading" of Katz's painting by Beattie would yield a parallel literary experience, one which would illuminate the artist's work as no more orthodox approach could.

Now, there have been occasions when a nonprofessional—someone from a different

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discipline—has been moved to write about art and in doing so has made a memorable contribution to our understanding of it. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay, "Cézanne's Doubt," is a famous case in point. One characteristic of such art writing, however, is that the interpretation is very personal. The author compensates for a lack of scholarly knowledge by making his own response the "subject" of the essay. He gathers his readers up in his all-embracing view, and takes possession of the work under discussion, making it over into something uniquely his, *his* Cézanne, *his* Piero, or whoever. Whether or not we can finally use what he gives us—often his subjective interpretation does not survive careful scrutiny—we cannot escape this feeling of "possession."

The trouble with Beattie's book is that, instead of losing herself in Katz's work, she simply points at it from a distance. To her, Katz's work is a puzzle that must be unlocked, so she spends her time trying to explain it—what's going on in it, why it looks the way it does, and so on. Her approach is a curious one since it is just what art historians are so often chided for doing. What's more, her conclusions never amount to much, so by the end of the book the reader is no closer to Katz's work than he was at the beginning.

Like anyone who is looking at art in a sustained way for the first time, Beattie is awed by the complexity she finds there. You can feel her sense of wonder as she discovers that painting isn't a snapshot-like *fait accompli* but rather a kind of cumulative record of thought that must be probed by the viewer and revealed to him over time. Unfortunately, she does something else newcomers to art often do, namely she mistakes the general for the specific. She doesn't realize that a characteristic of one work or oeuvre may be common to all painting. Thus we read, "Katz seems so forthright in what he does—so consistently to be a painter who paints without unnecessary complication—that the art of it may at first be misunderstood." Or later, "While the child may be oblivious to [a looming background forest's] presence, the way Katz has captured darkness changes our sense of the world." An apparent lack of complexity and a power to affect our perception of the observed world are qualities common to all painting; they are not only found in Katz's work.

More seriously, Beattie's "reading" of Katz is handicapped by a blind spot: for her, a Katz isn't a *painting,* a marked-up surface whose ordering is governed by certain formal considerations, but only a *picture,* an image of likeness. Modernism's concerns with the relationship of the painted image to the canvas edges, with the painter's stubborn retention of surface flatness despite the illusion of depth, with scale and color as abstract formal elements—all concerns of Katz's—are lost on Beattie, and she becomes troubled whenever she comes up against them.

To other eyes, Katz's work is less confusing. The artist reduces solid objects to light-struck surfaces that exist in optical relation to one another within pictorial space. They form an unbroken surface from one edge of the canvas to the other. Necessarily, solids that fold, that turn out of the line of sight or beyond the reach of the picture's light source, do not find their way into his pictures. But Beattie seems to understand nothing of this, and so she doesn't know what to make of the phenomenon when she encounters it. In *Joan,* a portrait of a seated woman with her hands partly hidden as she draws her hair back, "the fingers incomprehensibly and shockingly disappear." "What if," Beattie asks, "there is no hand beyond what we see?" Of the artist's paintings of couples, she observes: "Katz paints people's hands in such a way that they seem to be laid down rather than truly curving away the way a hand, in life, would grab, or link itself with another." This is true in a way, but Beattie doesn't trust herself enough to follow up on the idea, to discover its implications. Bizarrely, she will conclude that such stylizations are evidence of a deep, psychological meaning in the work. Would that they were! A deft but bloodless painter, Katz is the last

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artist in whose work one would expect to find any *Angst,* as he himself readily admits. Nonetheless, Beattie presses on. Of the hand in the air in *Joan,* she writes that it is "a disturbing image, a hand and not a hand. What should we believe? . . . That everything is all right? That the fingers' disappearance has no connotation that pertains to the whole?" And so on.

Beattie is so off-beam in these interpretations that they leave one wondering about her editor's claims of "like imagination." Beattie is reading Katz as though he's Eric Fischl, finding troubling undercurrents in ordinary situations. Fischl might, in fact, have made a better subject for Beattie. They share a post-Aquarian Age *anomie,* a preoccupation with the scruffy, unromantic side of life that grows out of a feeling of betrayal, of promises unfulfilled. How different from Katz's sunny arcadias, where everyone is well-adjusted, comfortable, and clean! The more one thinks about it, the odder this pairing of Beattie and Katz appears.

Beattie's ignorance of the language of pictorial form forces her into her greatest flaw as a critic. She sees the arrangement of forms before her as only a story, one whose content implies, for her, a narrative of which it is a fragment. Katz's sitters, to us so stylized as to be almost anemic, are real flesh and blood to Beattie. She sees in each one a story that needs to be told. For example, of Katz's portrait entitled *Hiroshi,* Beattie writes:

> . . . for all its simplicity, *Hiroshi* becomes a portrait with implied editorial comments. It asks us to think something—perhaps, even, to figure something out. The domino lights in the nighttime world behind Hiroshi suggest a geometry and precision as well as sketchily represent the polarities of light and dark. Backed up against the window, Hiroshi's suit is dark, his tie is dark, his eyebrows and hair are dark (protective coloration?). But there is no expression that tells us what Hiroshi feels, or even whether he is aware of the lights that glow behind him . . . . We know what he has turned his back on, but not what he looks toward. And because the focus is on Hiroshi alone, we have to understand that he is among them (the people who inhabit the lighted rooms outside), but not of them—literally not of them, because there is no *them* . . . . And what does this tell us about Hiroshi? That he senses himself in a solitary state? That he is by definition formidable, worth looking at, because he is the only representative of a world that is only an abstraction if someone does not turn on the lights and do the work? The world reflects him, and he reflects it (light shines on his shoulders), yet what his situation is we can only guess at.

Katz may be a realist, in the sense that he embraces everyday subjects. But his pictorial language comes out of abstract painting, and to miss that, as Beattie does, is to miss everything, certainly everything about his work that is interesting. Ignoring it, Beattie looks "through" the formal issues to the imaginary "story" only, reading images as literal slices of life unmediated by art. Fascinated by the painter's work, Beattie discounts the painter's mind.

I suppose we should be glad that in this latest addition to the literature of art we have been given a relatively direct interpretation rather than another opaque structuralist tract, so much the fashion these days. Still, there's often little difference in the end. With Beattie, one is forced to cope not only with an inadequate critical faculty but also with writing that is full of clichés, non sequiturs, and pregnant, summary sentences that actually say nothing. Take this passage, in which Beattie is talking about the people in Katz's paintings: "The essence of their selves, in the present moment, is what is caught. In *Lincolnville Allegory,* Ada [Katz's wife] has come to the point to which she has come." Or this: "What is obviously presented to us for judgment, three different gray dresses, makes us think about gray dresses and even about the women who model them . . . ." How could someone who writes this way enjoy the reputation she does? But,

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then, prose style is not really the point, is it? Reputation is. What really counts is the book jacket where, like musicians at a charity rock concert, two names from different worlds are billed together, their individual qualities subsumed under their common box-office draw. In more ways than one, *Alex Katz by Ann Beattie* is a book one can safely judge by its cover.

Poet of things past

Guido Gozzano The Colloquies and Selected Letters. Translated by J. C. Nichols. Carcanet, 141 pages, $12.50

reviewed by James Gardner

Mention Guido Gozzano to almost any Italian you meet, and you are apt to be answered with a look of immediate recognition, perhaps even a smile of appreciation. From Calabria to Trent he is everywhere esteemed by people who have been brought up reading him in the high schools and universities, and who return to him periodically to renew the pleasure of their initial acquaintance. Yet the moment you step outside of the peninsula, you will probably be met with only a blank look when you utter his name even among people with an active interest in modern poetry. Thus we should be grateful to Carcanet for bringing out this English edition of Gozzano's most important book of poems, *The Colloquies,* together with a selection of his letters. For if ever there was a poet who deserved a wider—that is to say, international—audience, that poet is Guido Gozzano.

One of the causes of Gozzano's success in Italy, aside from his literary excellence, has been that he, like Rupert Brooke in England, appeared to incarnate everyone's idea of how a poet should look and act and live. In the forty pages of letters that J. C. Nichols has included with his translation of *The Colloquies,* we find Gozzano, curiously, far more theatrical and self-conscious than he is in his poems. In his pursuit of the beautiful poetess Amalia Guglielminetti, for example, he carries his posturing almost to the point of parody, portraying himself as D'Annunzio's *superuomo* or Schopenhauer's disenchanted pessimist. In fact, his life had little of the drama that D'Annunzio's had; its contours are easy to sketch and its brevity resembles the brief and emphatic perfection of his poems. He was born into a well-to-do upper-middle-class Turinese family in 1883, and received a law degree before turning to journalism and literature. Although Gozzano made one voyage to India, which had been recommended to him as a cure for his perennially weak constitution, he spent most of his time in Turin or by the Tyrrhenian sea. Here, in the course of several love affairs, he managed to write three very well received volumes of poetry, as well as several volumes of prose, before succumbing to tuberculosis in 1916.

Guido Gozzano is usually grouped with those Italian poets from the first two decades of the century known as the *Crepuscolari* (among them Sergio Corazzini, Aldo Palazzeschi, and Marino Moretti), so called because of the twilight, *fin de siècle* mistiness with which they so often loved to infuse their work. They may be related in time to the Georgian poets in England before and during the First World War, to the extent that they were methodically practicing older verse forms like sonnets and quatrains, and also because they were immediately accessible and popular. Yet the *Crepuscolari* were far more closely related to modernism than the Georgians were, and they had much in common with the Symbolist and Decadent poetry of the 1890s. Like the poets of *The Yellow Book* in England, and the Jugendstil in Germany, like the followers of Verlaine in France and Darío in Spain, the *Crepuscolari* loved nothing better than to write vaporous odes to fans, peacocks, and women's hands. For no very good reason, their poetry often seems to take place at dusk on a day in late autumn, in one of those dilapidated, patchy, ill-kept gardens that are still to be found in every corner of Italy.

That Gozzano was part of such a tradi-

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tion, of course, will not of itself attract many readers to him, since most of the poetry associated with the *fin de siècle* had no greater artistic integrity than Tiffany lamps or Liberty Style porcelain. But Gozzano manages to rise far above the achievements of his compeers. Indeed, he is perhaps the only poet in any language to create memorable art entirely within the limits of the *fin de siècle* mood. Surely Mallarmé and Rilke also wrote great poetry, and this too was steeped in the cultural attitudes of the late nineteenth century. But Mallarmé's greatness consisted in a formal experimentation that merely borrowed some themes from his contemporaries: his treatment of these themes always strove for a razor-sharp accuracy that was unique in an aesthetic of hazy indeterminacy. And though Rilke wrote insipid poetry in the manner of the Symbolists, he became great only when he managed to stretch their idiom so far beyond its origins that there took place a transformation not only in degree but in kind as well.

Gozzano can be called a Symbolist, but he is nothing if not lucid and immediately understandable, and he has little of the veiled meaning that Mallarmé had intended when he coined the term. Montale called him "l'ultimo dei nostri classici," the last of our classics. By this expression he no doubt meant to refer to Gozzano's pre-modern lucidity, an untrammeled, almost expository unfolding of meaning that closely follows the inherent logic of his subject matter.

In Gozzano's early poetry, written from about his twentieth to his twenty-third year, although he displays that thorough grounding in the moods of the *fin de siècle* which he would retain to the end, he has not yet managed to transform those moods into something artistic. Here in full is the superfine aestheticism which D'Annunzio had made obligatory for all aspiring poets who followed him. And if even at this period Gozzano has more character than his contemporaries, he is nevertheless able to include in a fey Swinburnian sonnet such lines as these:

> Niuna dolcezza è ne l'aspetto fiero;
> emana de la bocca lussuriosa
> l'essenza del Silenzio del Mistero.
>
> (There is no sweetness in her proud
> countenance; rather from her sensual mouth
> there flows the essence of silence and mystery.[1])

Nor was this tone entirely overcome in his first published volume, *La Via del Rifugio* ("The Way of Refuge"), in 1907:

> Sui gradini consunti, come un povero
> mendicante mi seggo, umilicorde:
> o Casa, perche sbarri con le corde
> di glicine la porta del ricovero?
>
> (Like a poor beggar, I humbly sat on the
> consumptive stairs: O House, why with cords
> of wysteria do you bar the road to recovery?)

This first volume, however, does contain much that is enduring. It is above all a promise of something still to come, and this promise is brought to fruition in his second collection, *The Colloquies* ("I Colloqui"). As he appears in this volume, Gozzano is what Schiller would call a "sentimental" poet; that is, the poetry does not flow out of him with the seemingly irrepressible ebullience of D'Annunzio or Aldo Palazzeschi. Rather, he carefully deliberates over exactly how he will proceed, introducing a theme, developing it, and bringing it to some effective conclusion. Unlike D'Annunzio and Palazzeschi, he neither sought nor attained an idiom that is distinctly "Gozzanian." To be sure, there are certain themes and feelings which can be associated with him, and which, in their exquisite distillation, we know to be the work of a first-rate poet. But his language is nothing other than the effective application of the idiom handed to him by his age, which he has expertly fitted into hendecasyllables.

Like many a modernist, Gozzano in *The Colloquies* is a *bricoleur,* a kind of rag-picker,

1 All prose translations in this review are my own; all verse translations are by J. C. Nichols.

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who crams into these classically balanced verses all the flotsam and jetsam of the popular and high culture of his own generation, as well as of the two generations before his birth. He is constantly recording, with the precision of a novelist, the way society women, servants, and lawyers talk. He shows an unreserved affection for "le piccole cose di pessimo gusto" ("those precious little things in the worst taste"), by which he means all the baubles and byzantine mock-ups of Art Nouveau. His greatest interest seems to be in revealing how the universals of the human heart express themselves in the here and now. Thus he describes a fancy portrait of a woman in the following way:

> Intorno a quella che rideva illusa
> nel ricco peplo, e che morí di fame,
> v'era una stirpe logoro e confusa:
> topaie, materassi, vasellame,
> lucerne, ceste, mobili: ciarpame
> reietto, cosí caro alla mia Musa!
>
> (About her, smiling in her Grecian dress
> and Grecian dream, who came to die of
> hunger,
> there lay a tattered and promiscuous race:
> some furniture, some oil lamps, the odd
> hamper,
> mattresses, rats' nests, crockery: the lumber
> that since it is rejected charms my Muse!)

The poem from which this stanza is taken, "Signorina Felicita," is one of the best known in the Italian language, and it shows Gozzano at his most accomplished. The English poem that comes closest to its artistry is probably George Meredith's "Modern Love" (1853), which describes in novelistic detail a troubled love affair. Gozzano's poem tells the story of the poet's love for a woman of the working class. It contains passages of condensed and elliptical dialogue and lively novelistic descriptions like the one just quoted. But what Italians like best about this long poem is its mood of refined sentimentality, its bittersweet recognition of the impossibility of recapturing a vanished past. This mood is asserted from the very opening

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butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
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lines of "Signorina Felicita," which Italians can recall almost as readily as they can "nel mezzo del cammin' di nostra vita," the words that begin *The Divine Comedy*:

> Signorina Felicita, a quest' ora
> scende la sera nel giardino antico
> della tua casa. Nel mio cuore amico
> scende il ricordo. E ti rivedo ancora,
> e Ivrea rivedo e la cerulea Dora
> e quel dolce paese che non dico.
>
> (Signorina Felicita, this hour
> finds evening falling on your ancient home
> and ancient garden. And the memories come
> upon me thick and fast. I see once more
> you and Ivrea and the skyblue Dora,
> all that dear region which I do not name.)

In this passage Gozzano has managed to distill one of his favorite moods, that of nostalgia. It is significant that Proust, though older by half a generation, was writing *A la recherche du temps perdu* precisely in the same years. Indeed, there are passages in Gozzano's poetry, and in some of his short stories, like "L'altare del Passato" ("The Altar of the Past"), that come closer to the spirit of Proust than anything else known to this reviewer. Exactly as Proust looked back longingly to the generations of his parents' and grandparents' youth under the Second Empire, so Gozzano, in "The Friend of Grandmother Speranza," one of the best poems in *The Colloquies,* tenderly evokes the Italy of two generations before, as he describes the young girls Carlotta and Speranza, the latter of whom he would know only in her old age as his grandmother:

> Amica di Nonna, conosco le aiole per ove leggesti
> i casi di Jacopo mesti nel tenero libro del Foscolo.
>
> Ti fisso nel'albo con tanta tristezza, ov'è di tuo pugno
> la data: *ventotto di giugno del mille ottocentocinquanta.*
>
> (My grandmother's friend, I now make my way through walks where you read
> of Jacopo's fate, so sad, in Foscolo's tender book.
> I gaze at the album, your gift, the inscription and the date:
> *June the twenty-eighth, eighteen hundred and fifty.*)

It is such excellent passages as these that make the poems in *The Colloquies* as fresh and appealing as they are, qualities which are also to be found in *Le Farfalle* ("The Butterflies"), Gozzano's final and unfinished poetic essay. Here, he memorably describes the life of a generation of butterflies, their miraculous transformation from base caterpillars into poetic creatures of rare beauty. One element of this poem which gives it an unusual importance is that it is, in all probability, the last important poem—and the only modern one—written in the tradition of scientific verse. This moribund genre, which began with the Greek of Aratus and the Latin of Lucretius and Vergil, reached all the way up to the eighteenth century, when James Thompson and Pope in England, and Parini and Mascheroni in Italy, recorded the breakthroughs of science in poetic form. Gozzano briefly revived the tradition by allying his own acute observation of butterflies to a glowing and evocative power of expression. He closely based his work on his predecessor Mascheroni, but he is an infinitely more gifted poet, as he reveals even in such lines as these, wherein he records the otherwise prosaic eating habits of a moth:

> Mirabile è la bocca, ordigno armato
> d'acute lime in gemina ordinanza.
> Concavo un labbro chiude nell'incavo
> il margine fogliare che due salde
> mandibole con moto orizzontale
> tagliano a scatto, in guisa de cesoja.
>
> (The mouth is a marvel, an armed contraption of sharp files in geminate formation. The concave and convex lips meet to hold the edges of the leaf, which two strong jaws in horizontal motion jerkily cut up, as though a pair of shears.)

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Gozzano has been well served by J.C. Nichols in the Carcanet edition. His translations are often beautiful and evocative, and they generally capture the cadences of the original. Sometimes, however, Nichols departs from the meaning of the Italian more than his inconsistent obedience to the forms would justify. In the passage from "The Friend of Grandmother Speranza" quoted above, for instance, he translates "Ti fisso nel'albo con tanta tristezza" as "I gaze at the album, your gift," when it should be something more like "I look at you in the photoalbum with a certain sadness." But the finest qualities in Gozzano, the Proustian sentiment and the material evocation of things past, are all there, awaiting the English readership that they have so long deserved.

A Ford revival?

Sondra Stang, editor
The Ford Madox Ford Reader.
The Ecco Press, 515 pages, $13.50

reviewed by Victor M. Cassidy

Paraphrasing Hokusai, Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) once called himself an "old man mad about writing." Ford's phrase is apt: during his lifetime in England, France, and the United States, he published eighty-one books, produced four hundred and nineteen periodical articles, and contributed poems, stories, introductions, and the like to fifty-seven other volumes. Among Ford's works are thirty-two novels, twelve volumes of poetry, seven memoirs, literary criticism, commentary, history, and biography. Writing was what Ford most wanted to do, and nothing—illness, poverty, discouragement, or personal calamity—kept him from it.

Ford devoted his best efforts to fiction, and it is primarily for his novels that he is now remembered. *The Good Soldier* (1915), a story of marital infidelity which Ford called "my best book," is an acknowledged masterpiece. *Parade's End* (1924-28), a tetralogy set during World War One in England, is widely admired. Some other Ford books are reasonably well known, but most of his novels have been out of print for fifty years or more and are virtually unobtainable.

Writers usually think better of Ford's work than the public does. W. H. Auden, for example, wrote in 1961 that *Parade's End*

> has never yet been a popular success and few critics, I believe, have paid much attention to it. This neglect passes my comprehension. Of the various demands one can make of a novelist, that he show us the way in which a society works, that he show an understanding of the human heart, that he create characters in whose reality we believe and for whose fate we care, that he describe things and people so that we feel their physical presence, that he illuminate our moral consciousness, that he make us laugh and cry, that he delight us by his craftsmanship, there is not one, it seems to me, that Ford does not completely satisfy. There are not many English novels that deserve to be called great: *Parade's End* is one of them.

Ford developed his fiction technique during a long period of collaboration with Joseph Conrad. The two men were introduced in 1898. In those days, Ford was a promising but rather unfocused author of twenty-five who had published poetry, children's stories, a biography, and a novel. Conrad, who was Polish by birth, had grown up in France and worked on British merchant ships before beginning his literary career in England. He was forty. Though Conrad spoke English fluently, he wrote it rather slowly. When he complained about this problem, friends suggested that he invite Ford to work with him.

The collaboration, which began as an experiment, lasted a decade and proved decisive for Ford. During his years with Conrad, Ford committed himself to fiction, developed a critical philosophy, and improved his technical skills. Together the men wrote three novels. Both produced other work independently.

At the time the collaborators met, the typical English novel was likely to contain a

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straightforward account of the lives of its characters. Ford and Conrad were agreed in finding this approach artistically unsatisfactory. It was their view that in real life we form impressions of people and events through a process of slow, haphazard discovery. Therefore, to be convincing, fictional narratives must seem to unfold in the same manner. "The true artfulness of art," Ford wrote, "is to appear as if in disordered habiliments. Life meanders, jumps backwards and forwards, draws netted patterns like those on a musk melon. It seems the most formless of things." The Ford-Conrad approach to fiction, which they called Impressionism, is commonly employed today. Though the two authors did not originate this technique, they did much to develop and establish it in English literary practice.

As he modernized the novel with Conrad, Ford also worked to rejuvenate verse. Rejecting the precious "poetic diction" that was fashionable then, he wrote that "verse must be at least as well written as prose if it is to be poetry," and embodied this principle in his own work. He found responsive readers for his poems and a receptive audience for his ideas when he came into contact with several younger authors, including Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis.

This new generation of (then unknown) writers approached Ford because he was editor of *The English Review,* a literary monthly. Late in 1908, Ford had moved to London from the countryside to help found this journal. During his thirteen-month tenure there, he printed consistently excellent work, discovered several previously unknown writers (e.g., Lawrence and Lewis), and, in so doing, helped to launch the modern movement in English literature.

Ford's most enthusiastic adherent in the *English Review* days was Ezra Pound. When Ford and Pound first met, Pound's mentors were Edwardian poets and he was immersed in studies of the Troubadours. Through the example of his own work and in conversation, Ford helped Pound to find a more contemporary voice. "One was hunting for a simple and natural language," Pound explained many years later, "and Ford was ten years older, and accelerated the process toward it . . . . Ford knew the best people who were there before him . . . and he had nobody to play with until Wyndham [Lewis] and I and my generation came along."

If Ford Madox Ford was—as the record clearly shows—the author of great novels and a key figure in modern literature, why is he not more widely recognized today? Why—for all his talent, hard work, and intense devotion to the art of writing—did he have a shaky reputation during most of his life? And what are we now, almost a half century after his death, to make of this curious figure?

These questions are prompted yet again by the appearance of *The Ford Madox Ford Reader.* This 515-page anthology is the centerpiece of an apparent effort to create a Ford revival. Over the past few years, The Ecco Press in New York City has republished four out-of-print Ford novels, three book-length reminiscences, and a volume of travel impressions. In 1986, Ecco devoted an entire number of *Antaeus,* its semi-annual publication, to essays about Ford. More reprints are on the way.

In the introduction to the Ford *Reader,* Sondra Stang, the editor, writes that her purpose is "to present as many sides of Ford's genius as possible in a single volume and to bring to light works that until now, only a handful of readers have been able to enjoy." The *Reader* is organized into eight sections: novels, reminiscences, literary criticism, cultural criticism, art criticism, poetry, miscellaneous writings, and letters. The most important of these, the section devoted to novels, contains nothing from *The Good Soldier* or *Parade's End.* Copyright problems prevented their inclusion, and the editor claims in any case that it is more important to reprint lesser-known work. She also acknowledges that Ford's novels are "particularly resistant" to excerpting, "depending as they do on a complication of pattern that is intrinsic to Ford's idea of writing." In a

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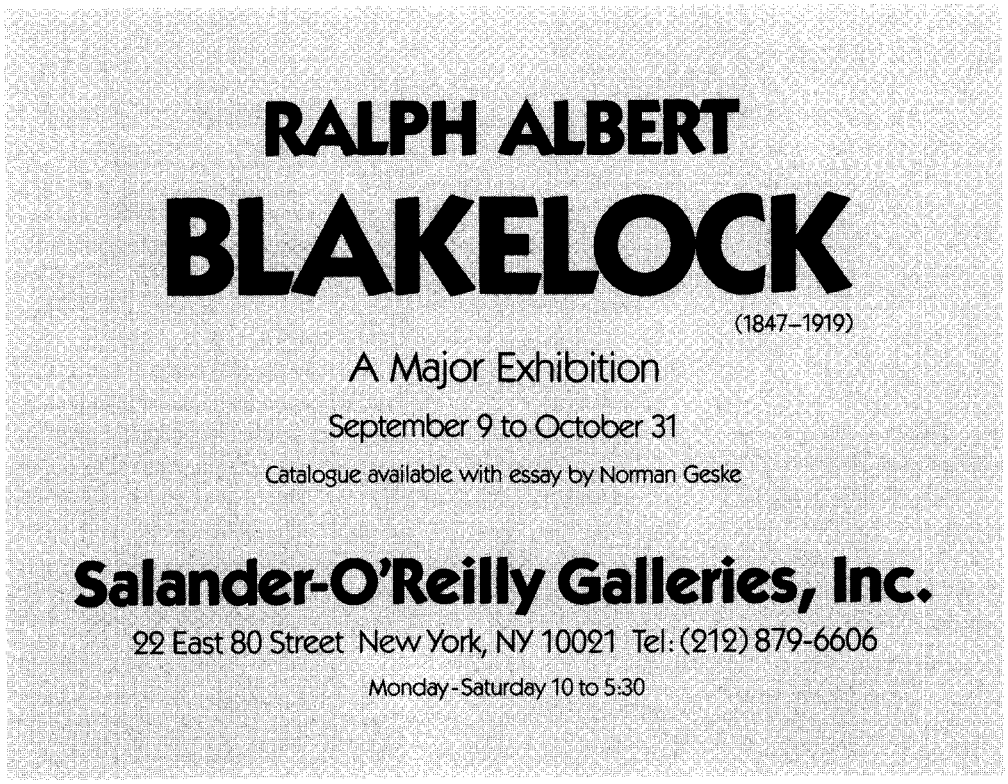
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disclaimer, she concludes that "excerpting can give no true idea of what the novels are like, and they are therefore under-represented here."

Despite this admission of defeat, Stang does rather well by Ford's fiction. She presents the memorable opening passages of *The Fifth Queen* (1906), a historical novel set in the England of Henry VIII. In the excerpt, Ford introduces Thomas Cromwell, Henry's Lord Privy Seal and chief advisor, whose personal network of seven hundred spies throughout the kingdom has aided his rise to power. Cromwell is travelling by barge on a winter night along the Thames River to Henry's castle. In Ford's hands, the barge becomes an enormous floating stage with speakers momentarily appearing out of the blackness, their faces lit by torches. The striking, highly visual imagery in this scene brings Cromwell and his colleagues powerfully to life.

Other excerpts show Ford in a variety of moods. He is satirically amusing in *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911), a historical fantasy about a pompous London clubman who is thrust back into the Middle Ages as the result of a railway accident. In *The 'Half Moon'* (1909), a somber Ford describes in painfully vivid detail the white man's attitude toward the American Indians and his mistreatment of them. This novel is set in the era of Henry Hudson. Of considerable interest, too, is the excerpt from *A Call* (1910), a largely forgotten tale of Edwardian marriage that foreshadows *The Good Soldier*.

The poetry section of the *Reader* persuades us that Ford, while not the equal of Eliot, Pound, and other eminent moderns, deserves wider recognition than he has so far achieved as a poet. Two selections of special importance are *On Heaven* (1918), a description of what heaven might really be like, and *Buckshee* (1936), love poetry written for Janice Biala, the artist who became Ford's companion in 1930. Stang should have included more than one of the nine poems that constitute *Buckshee*. It is the best single work of Ford's last years.

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Among the many examples of literary criticism in the *Reader,* the liveliest come from *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924), the memoir that Ford wrote "at fever heat" within two months of his friend's death. Here Ford tells, with humor and gusto, how he and Conrad wrote their books. His description of their literary collaboration becomes a primer on the art of the novel.

Much excellent writing has also been rescued from rare books and periodicals. The introduction to Jean Rhys's *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927) is a rambling, charming account of Paris's *rive gauche.* Ford analyzes the English character in *The Spirit of the People* (1907) and reminds us in his pamphlet *This Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1912) that he was a feminist long before such views became fashionable. These are some of the materials that make *The Ford Madox Ford Reader* a rich and wonderful book.

The selections republished in the *Reader* are so animated and well written that the reader wonders why Ford's reputation is not better today. Understandably, the editor of the *Reader* has ignored the rubbish that Ford wrote. Taken as a whole, his work is wildly uneven. As Pound once put it, "[Ford's] best prose was probably lost, as isolated chapters in unachieved and too-quickly-issued novels."

He often wrote badly because he lived in such chaos. Hopelessly impractical when it came to money, he moved around a great deal and had a messy personal life. He earned all of his income from writing and often pressed for the publication of work he knew to be weak so he could be paid for it. *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* were produced during periods of relative financial and personal calm in his life.

Ford's troubles obviously began in childhood. He was raised to be a "genius" in a stimulating yet intimidating household. His father was the music critic for the London *Times* and his grandfather, Ford Madox Brown, was a famous pre-Raphaelite painter. Through the Ford household passed the leading writers and artists of the day—Swinburne, Carlyle, the Rossettis, Holman Hunt, and many others. These great Victorians, Ford was later to say, "were perpetually held up to me as standing upon unattainable heights and . . . I was perpetually being told that if I could not attain these heights I might just as well not cumber the earth." Stella Bowen, the artist who lived with Ford for several years during the Twenties, confirmed that he doubted his own worth. "Poor Ford," she declared in a memoir. "He was a writer—a complete writer—and nothing but a writer. And he never even felt sure of his gift! He needed more reassurance than anyone I have ever met."

Ford's fear of failure manifested itself in his well-known tendency to fabulize. In conversation and in published reminiscences, Ford often told misleading or entirely false stories about his ancestry, his finances, and his social connections. A tireless name-dropper, he represented himself as a far grander person than he really was and even took the trouble to fabricate tales about his prowess at golf. When this kind of nonsense appeared in print, some readers complained while others concluded that Ford was a fool. He seemed not to have noticed or to have cared that such behavior was damaging to whatever legitimate reputation he had achieved as a writer and editor.

One of the many pointless and self-destructive episodes that resulted from Ford's fantasizing occurred in 1920 when he published several articles of commentary and reminiscence in *The English Review.* In one of these, Ford described himself as a young author "listening respectfully to a certain delightful Novelist whilst he lectured me on how to write. But as far as I could see," Ford continued, "his only technical rule was this: *Never introduce your hero and heroine together in the first chapter* [italics Ford's]." From the context it was clear that the "delightful Novelist" was H. G. Wells.

Wells soon protested in a letter to the editor. He called Ford's story a "childish falsehood" and denied that he had delivered such

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an inane lecture. "Why does [Ford] make capital of the friendliness and hospitalities of the past to tell stupid and belittling stories of another man who is, by his own showing, a very inferior and insignificant person?" Wells asked. He then said that he had once told Ford not to write novels with Joseph Conrad and declared that the results of the collaboration had justified his own worst fears.

At the time of this controversy, Ford was ill, poor, and forgotten by the public while Wells was one of England's most popular authors. Nothing was to be gained by antagonizing an old friend, but Ford was too blinded with vanity to see how he was harming and isolating himself.

All this is history now. Today we have The Ecco Press working on behalf of Ford's reputation with the *Reader* and the new editions. Though Ecco has surely brought excellent writings back into print, it seems unlikely that these will significantly alter our view of Ford. Though he produced first-rate work, Ford's achievements are finally too mixed to support a full-scale revival.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Doing modern music, doing American music *by Samuel Lipman*
The New York School reconsidered *by Jed Perl*
Ghost stories *by Brad Leithauser*
Proust's Ruskin *by Guy Davenport*
Richard Ellmann's "Four Dubliners" *by William Pritchard*
Paul Morand *by Renee Winegarten*
Frank Stella at MOMA *by Roger Kimball*

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Letters

The confinement of free verse

To the Editors:

In "The Confinement of Free Verse" (May, 1987), Mr. Brad Leithauser argues that the poet makes a "prosodic contract" with the reader and that as free verse makes no such contract it is bankrupt. I find Mr. Leithauser's terms revealing. He wishes to establish meter again so that the writing of poetry will be a predictable and sound investment. There is, however, an element in poetry that is unpredictable: talent.

I see no point to an argument that is based on the reading of bad poems. Mr. Leithauser speaks of the "jadedness and self-congratulation" of the usual, bad free-verse poem. But this is not a criticism of free verse—it is a criticism of the content and tone of bad poems. Bad poetry proves nothing except that the poet is incompetent. Would Mr. Leithauser like to have some examples of bad poetry written in meter? They are easily available—not every poet who writes in meter is Richard Wilbur.

For Mr. Leithauser, it seems, the whole "craft" of verse is comprised in repeating a stress at regular intervals. But there is more to rhythm than this. One could dissect a poem in free verse by, say, William Carlos Williams and show how the rhythms, line breaks, and sounds contribute to the effect. But this would be merely distracting—in well-written free verse, form and meaning are one thing. Mr. Leithauser does not seem to understand this—how else are we to read his statement that free verse may "heat up" the poem? In his view, not only is there an adversary relationship between poet and reader, but between the form of the poem and the poem itself.

Mr. Leithauser asserts that free verse is "exhausted," but he offers no evidence for this. Instead he makes predictions: free verse will not produce the equivalent of Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Of course it won't—free-verse poets are not trying to write imitations, especially of poems written three hundred years ago. And could Milton have written Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* Rilke's *Duino Elegies,* or Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Invisible Reality,* all of which are in free verse?

Mr. Leithauser's argument is entirely beside the point. Poetry doesn't depend on meter or free verse—it depends on who's writing. Great poets have written greatly in whatever form they chose.

Louis Simpson
Setauket, NY

Brad Leithauser replies:

Reading Mr. Simpson's reply to my essay, which I have done a number of times, has been a peculiar experience. I find my outlook derided and my arguments espoused simultaneously; much of what he offers by way of correction was already postulated in my essay. To my admission that "the typical poem of any age will be at best a mediocre affair," Mr. Simpson adds that examples of bad metrical verse are "easily available." To my discussion of the complex constituents that comprise rhythm, Mr. Simpson brings the news that "there is more to rhythm" than "repeating a stress at regular intervals." And so forth.

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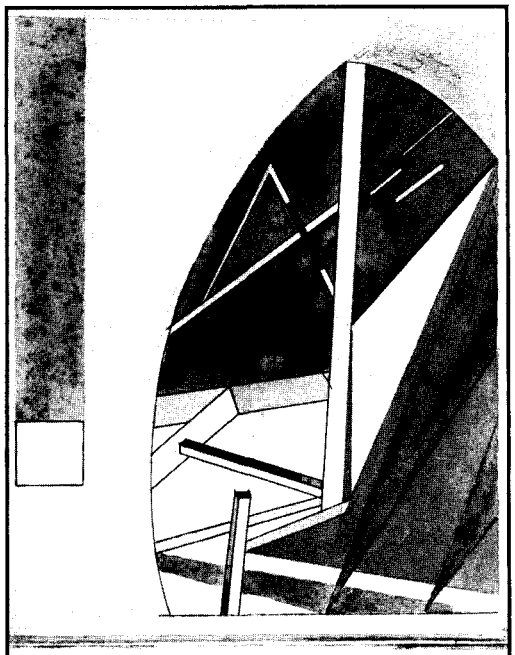
Had Mr. Simpson remained content merely to echo my arguments, even while ostensibly countering and reproaching me, I would equally have remained content to let his letter stand without remark. Unfortunately, he has also distorted much of what I said. A sentence-by-sentence refutation would outgrow the space available here, but in passing I note of his first paragraph that sentences one and three are false and sentence four a truism posing as an insight. The remaining sentence (that he found my terms "revealing") is, I hope, valid.

I've never met Mr. Simpson, and cannot begin to plumb his motivations, but I am honestly unable to believe that *he* believes that I am seeking "to establish meter again so that the writing of poetry will be a predictable and sound investment." Why, then, does he say it? I wish I knew . . . What I *did* say in my essay, on enough occasions and in enough ways that I—and the editors of *The New Criterion*—worried that I might be repeating myself (but which, perhaps, I should have spelled out yet again and yet again), is that American verse at the moment needs "fresh tools," "new methods." Rather than taking the thoughtless approach that Mr. Simpson ascribes to me (an unadventurous, uninformed "Let's-return-to-iambics!"), I observed that the contemporary poet may be in a singular and fascinatingly uneasy position: both "understandably impatient" with the iamb and skeptical of a free-verse orthodoxy whose "prosody is limited to enjambment." I believe wholeheartedly that in, say, a hundred years, any literary historian who deems our era worthy of study will regard it as a time of necessary prosodic restlessness; the last few decades of the twentieth century (and, probably, the first few of the twenty-first) will be seen as a time when the most noteworthy poetry was marked by a driving, often frustrated, hunger for innovation.

As a poet, Mr. Simpson may himself feel little of this restlessness. He may regard contemporary free verse as robust, and fortified by this attitude he may go on to write lively, powerful poems. I hope so. I love good free verse and am delighted to take it wherever I find it. As I mentioned in my essay, I believe that "many of our best contemporary poets work chiefly with free forms"—a statement which, significantly, remains utterly



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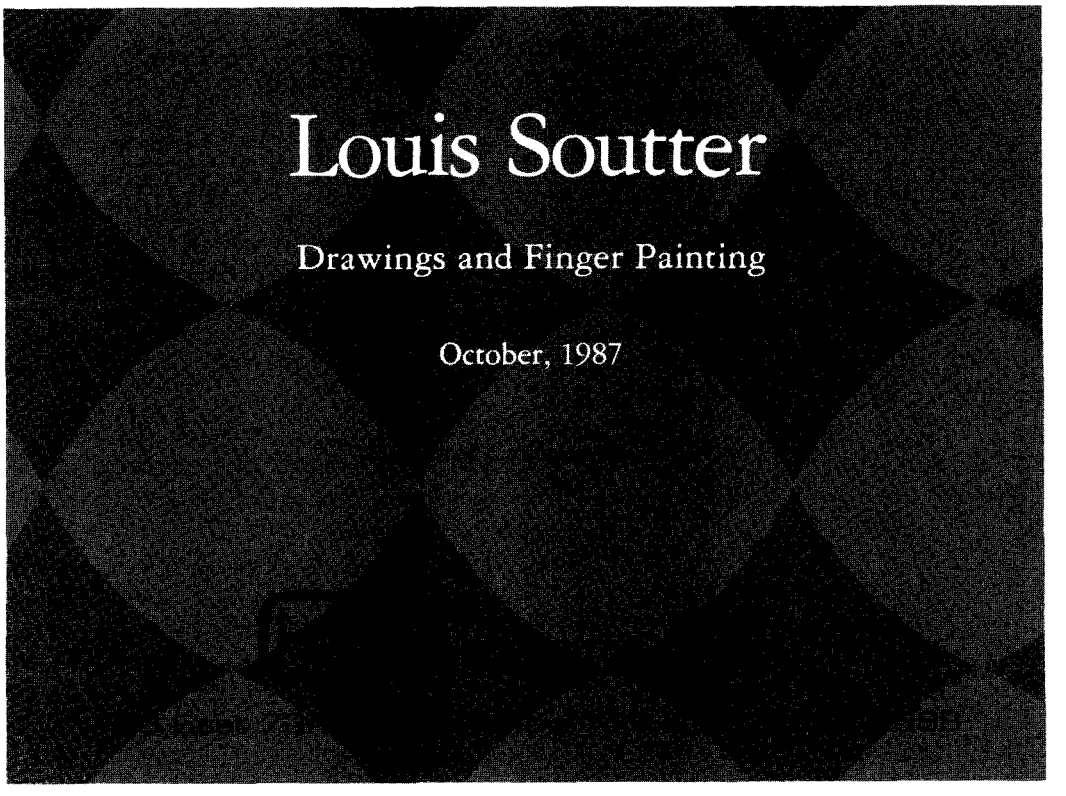
incompatible with Mr. Simpson's "explanation" of what I said.

Mr. Simpson also attributes to me an "adversary relationship" between poet and reader. This is a curious interpretation and (to employ his own characterization of a choice of terms) a "revealing" one. I don't think any reader who approaches open-mindedly both my essay and Mr. Simpson's reply can fail to see that his is the adversarial stance. And, frankly, I don't quite understand why he takes the hectoring approach he does. As the examples of Pound and Eliot make clear, both free and metrical verse must be subjected to regular scrutiny—and skepticism. Such doubts are useful, not destructive. If new neurological research proves potentially illuminating about how the brain absorbs a line of verse (one of the developments I touched upon in my essay), and also hints at innate curbs on our ability to bend poetic form to our goals and theories, surely these data also must be assimilated into our critical theories.

"Great poets have written greatly in whatever form they chose," Mr. Simpson concludes, but in fact this is a "choice" gravely constricted by a multiplicity of factors (historical, linguistic, psychological, and, ultimately, physiological) which are awesomely complicated. As I pointed out in my essay, "[f]undamental changes in prosody, such as those which occurred in English in the fourteenth century, may not be the product of artistic innovation so much as of adaptation." I believe that at this point in the shadowed, final corner of the twentieth century both free and formal verse are being pressured, or impinged upon, by a range of literary and social and technological forces we can hardly identify or isolate. As critics, as poets, we can only do our humble best to locate our most legitimate—our most verdant—responses to these forces. In humorlessly belittling those who call for new forms, Mr. Simpson may feel that he works loyally on the side of free verse. He works instead on the side of the simplistic, the reflexive, the unreflecting.



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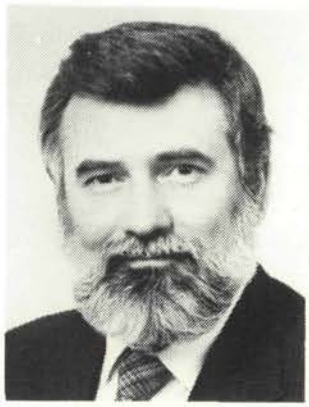

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